



まよ ちき

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11

あさのハジメ
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瞬間。

「」

近衛の口唇が、俺の口唇と重なっていた。

キス。

ひどく不器用で、それでいて一生懸命なキスだった。



Chapter 1: Hospital Friends

This might be a bit sudden, but I don't particularly like hospitals. Be it the smell, the atmosphere, or the lonesome air going around, I never liked it. Well, anybody who goes around saying 'I love hospitals' probably has a screw loose. But, whether you like it or not, there are times when you have to go there.

"Then, please take care."

With this template phrase, I was sent away by the doctor, leaving the room. Looking at my left hand while walking down the hallway, I saw a fresh white bandage wrapped around it. According to the doctor, the cut was fairly deep, but nothing that would require me to be hospitalized. Of course, I had to make up a lie along the lines of 'I accidentally cut my hand with a kitchen knife', but it seems like that worked.

I mean, no way could I tell them that I was threatened with a knife, while trying to break into a room in my apartment building. As for the reason why I suffered this injury...

"Odd Jobs-san, are you done already?" An emotionless robotic voice reverberated inside the hallway.

Looking over, she sat on a long chair in the waiting area, still wearing her eyepatch with an unfitting maid uniform—Saotome Ichigo. She is working as the maid of the Suzutsuki family, and the person who originally pointed the knife at me.

"How are your injuries?"

"It's fine. Wasn't that big of a deal after all." I faintly waved my hand at her to show.

In fact, the pain wasn't as bad as it may seem like. At least not compared to all the hellish training I went through with Mom and my little sister ever since I was five. Getting hit by a truck before was much worse.

“What, so I probably didn’t have to accompany you.”

“Um, you’re the reason I ended up with this injury in the first place, remember...”

“YES. I’m sorry. But, you’re partially to blame as well. I didn’t expect you to grab my knife like that.”

“Well, not wrong.”

“If Subaru hadn’t stopped me, I surely would have sent you off to the hospital.”

“I’m already here, remember?”

Did she forget that this is a hospital? Maybe she’s just shocked herself.

“NO. I say hospital, but it’s not what I was talking about.”

“So what was it then?”

“A morgue.”

“That means you were planning on killing me, right!?”

“Then, a doctor for your head?”

“How were you planning on sending me there!?”

“First, I would have made you unable to say anything except the words ‘panties’ ‘naked’ and ‘grade schooler backpack’. Then, he’ll surely admit you to a hospital.”

You’re treating me like a disabled person now.

“Leaving aside the jokes, be thankful to Kanade-ojousama. Thanks to her, you even got an appointment this quickly.”

“I know that.”

Looking at the clock hanging in the hallway, I saw that it was already past 9pm. Visiting times were clearly over. However, using the

connections of her family, Suzutsuki got me an appointment. If anything, the reason Ichigo-san accompanied me is because Suzutsuki told her to.

“.....”

That’s right, Suzutsuki did. She’s one of the reasons why I even suffered from this injury in the first place. It was all so that I could get into her room, and have a chance at talking with her. However, the words I got back from her caught me off-guard.

—*I love you!*

While shedding tears, these were the words she told me. It was a confession, without a doubt. It sounded different from her usual nonsense, like it came from the bottom of her heart.

“What’s wrong, Odd Jobs-san, your expression looks a bit complicated. Does it hurt after all?”

“No, not exactly...”

In fact, my left hand was still hurting a bit, but I personally didn’t care about that. Suzutsuki’s confession just came out of nowhere, I simply didn’t know how to react. We’re talking about **that** Suzutsuki Kanade after all. I mean, just what does she like about me? We’re clearly not a good match. What was the whole reason behind the Suzutsuki Revolution then? I mean, Konoe is a girl, but still.

Still, surprisingly enough, Suzutsuki isn’t the only one who confessed to me. There’s also Usami Masamune. She said that she has feelings for me too...What even is this situation? To think I’d be confessed to by two girls in such a short time. I wouldn’t be surprised if I found hints about this on the Mayan calendar, that’s how big of an event it is.

Because of my gynophobia, a condition I was given by my family, I never really had the possibility to get involved with girls, so I don’t have any experience with such a sweet event. But, there’s one thing even I understand. Being confessed to, I have to properly reply.

“You might be worrying about something, but sometimes it’s best to

not think about it too deeply. Doesn't fit you."

"Mind your own business, will you. What are you even doing, hm?" I stopped my thoughts, and asked her.

After all, she hasn't looked at me once, and only gazed down at her hands. There, she had a pink lump of thread.

"Are you making a sweater?"

"YES. It's almost Christmas, so I'm making a present."

"Huh~ For Suzutsuki, I'm assuming?"

"Exactly. I'm surprised you knew, Odd Jobs-san."

"Well..."

I didn't know how to respond, so I simply averted my gaze. I mean, she wrote [KANADE LOVE!] on it, so it was sort-of obvious. This sweater is like a love letter, so I'd be shocked if it wasn't for Suzutsuki.

"Sewing is good. Calms me down."

"Oh yeah, you liked all this handicraft work, right?"

"NO. Not like, I love it."

"And yet your club's activities are an absolute mess."

With the whole ranking matches, hunting bears during Golden Week, going to an inhabited island during summer break...It really doesn't sound like a handicrafts club.

"I told you before, but that's because of Schrö. She turned the handicrafts club into some military company. As long as I can do my sewing, I'm fine." So she said, and continued working on the sweater with robotic and precise movement.

She's made some good progress, so she should be able to make it in time for Christmas. With all of this happening, October had ended.

We made it to December, and reached winter break. Still...Christmas break, huh. Thinking about it, every year on Christmas was like hell. Kureha would scream 'Merry Christmas!', while pulling a moonsault press on me. Nothing's merry about this. If Santa saw this, he'd retire immediately.

"By the way, don't tell the lady about this. It's supposed to be a surprise present."

"I understand. But, isn't making a whole sweater a lot of work?"

"YES. I had to look into Kanade-ojousama's three sizes after all."

"....."

What am I even supposed to say here? First of all, how did you figure out her three sizes? While she was sleeping? Also, you don't need her three sizes for a sweater. You only need bust and waist. Why the hips?

"By the way, I also have a present for Odd Jobs-san in the works."

"Huh?" I was surprised.

However, she fully ignored my confusion, and pointed at a plastic bag next to her. Out of that appeared a long, soft object...W-Wait, this is...!

"A scarf...?"

"YES. I practiced a bit before making a sweater, and tried making it." Ichigo-san said, and passed it to me.

Woah, it's so warm. She might have actually used some expensive material for it. Hmm...she said it was for practice, but I don't know how to feel about it...

"...Hm?"

What's this. There's some letters engraved into it. Did she write [SAKAMACHI LOVE!] by any chance? I checked, only to find... [SAKAMACHE DEATH!].

“Why are you cursing me!?”

“Eh, I just wrote [Sakamache Yes], right?”

“The Yes turned into Death, okay!”

“I thought of putting it on with a punk rock feeling.”

“Far too punk!”

Not even some death metal band would wear this kind of scarf. It’s more like a threat than a present.

“Also, you wrote my name wrong.”

“In what way?”

“SAKAMACHE...”

“Wasn’t your name Sakamache Kinjirou?”

“I never heard a family name like that!”

“Didn’t you say ‘My name is Sakamache Kinjioru! Check it out!’?”

“Don’t change my character like that...”

What kind of rapper am I? I don’t remember declaring myself to be into hip-hop.

“It’s fine, I can guarantee that it feels good on you.”

“Eh, ah, wait...!”

Once again, Ichigo-san ignored my words, and wrapped the scarf around my neck. Oh man, it really feels warm. That’s Rouran Academy handicraft club’s president for you, she knows her work. Not to mention that she even put it on for me. She may be an expressionless robot, but she has her kind side...

“By the way.”

There, Ichigo-san suddenly spoke up, while holding the scarf around

my neck.

“What did you talk about with Kanade-ojousama?”

“.....” I went silent.

I can't ever tell her. After all, Suzutsuki confessed to me. If the maid who loves Suzutsuki knows about this, she'll definitely bring me to a morgue...Wait?

“I-Ichigo-san? Aren't you putting a bit too much strength on your grip?”

“YES. I'm strangling you.”

“.....”

...This is bad. The hallway of the hospital suddenly turned into an interrogation room. Also, this is terrifying. Never have I seen somebody use a scarf as a strangling object. Where did she learn about this? At this rate, [SAKAMACHE DEATH!] will happen for good.

“L-Let go! I can't die here!”

“Rest assured, the preparations are completed.”

“...Preparations?”

“This is a hospital. Even if you die, you can be revived.”

“I'm not calm about this at all, okay!?”

Waaaaah, big trouble captain! Her eyes are dead serious! If you looked up [Yandere] on Ni*oNico Douga, this is the face that would pop up.

“Urk...”

Did she sense that something happened between me and Suzutsuki? I don't think she was listening in on us, so it must be her intuition as a maid? If not, then she probably wouldn't go this far.

“Now, answer me. What were you talking about with Kanade-ojousama?” Ichigo-san asked once again, tightly grasping the scarf.

T-This damn yandere maid...! Did she knit a scarf just for this!? If so, then I might actually feel a bit bashful. Of course, she’s using this LOVE not for me, but for Suzutsuki Kanade. Anyway, I need to get out of this situation, or else...

“...What are you two folks doing here?” An annoyed voice rang out.

For a moment, I thought I had heard the voice of an angel, but an angel wouldn’t use such a rough tone, and they sure as hell wouldn’t have this kind of anime voice.

“It says right here. ‘Please keep it down in the hallway!’, right? Even if Christmas is close, you shouldn’t get too excited here.”

“Hmpf...” Ichigo-san finally softened her grip on the scarf.

...I’m saved. Naturally, I know the owner of this voice—Narumi Schrödinger. She is the famous vice president of Rouran Academy’s handicrafts club. No clue why she’s here, but I’m at least thankful that she saved me. I turned towards the girl, and—There stood Santa Claus. Or rather, it was Schrö-senpai wearing a Santa costume.

“.....” I was at a loss for words.

Weird. Maybe my brain is still feeling numb from the strangling, because there’s no way I would have such a surreal hallucination.

“Schrö, why are you looking like that? You’re clearly the most excited out of all of us.”

“S-Shut up! There’s a reason as to why I’m wearing these clothes!”

A maid and person in Santa costume were having an argument in the hospital hallway. What a sight this is. Maybe a nurse will be joining us soon.

“The thing is, we’re having a party at home.”

“A party?” Ichigo-san asked, confused, but I figured out the reason

immediately.



It's probably a party to cheer up my little sister because of her broken heart. Today, Sakamachi Kureha was rejected. Schrö-senpai probably wanted to cheer her up for that. Maybe they pulled the Christmas party ahead?

“So, as the senior, I was doing my best to get the party booming,

which led to this.”

“You’re as energetic as always...Where did you even bring out these clothes from?”

“We had them at home. My family is a toy maker, remember? We had some Santa costumes for a previous campaign.”

“But why wear that?”

“What’s it matter? Both Kureha and Nakuru were happy, you know?”

“Well, it does look good on you...”

The Santa uniform was a perfect fit on Schrö-senpai’s body. It was red, looked fluffy, and added to her already energetic atmosphere. On top of that, she wore a miniskirt, making her look like a mini Santa. Narumi Schrödinger is the mini Santa.

“.....”

Merry Christmas indeed. That’s what I chanted inside of my head. The destructive power is no joke, seriously. If I knew that Schrö-senpai brought my Christmas presents, I definitely wouldn’t be able to sleep. If anything, I’d just run my mouth with ‘Can I just have you as my present?’.

“Schrö, why are you here.”

“Huh? ‘Cause of your master, of course.”

“Kanade-ojousama’s orders?”

“Yup. Right as I was having fun at the party, she sent me a mail, saying ‘Jirou-kun got hurt, so can you look after him at the hospital?’, you know.”

“Urk...That’s Kanade-ojousama for you...” Ichigo-san bit her lip.

At the same time, I sighed in relief. She probably sent Schrö-senpai here as a countermeasure against Ichigo-san. Another member of the handicraft club would be necessary to keep her under control, so she

sent an SOS to her. That's Suzutsuki for you, she knows how to provide some proper service.

"Still, that surprised me." There, Schrö-senpai suddenly put her hand on her chin. "To think you two had that kind of relationship."

"....."

Hold on. I feel like she's having a horrible misunderstanding.

"...Schrö, I can't ignore that comment."

"Huh? I mean, you put a scarf around Onii-chan's neck, right?"

"That isn't wrong, but..."

"To be perfectly honest, you looked really lovey-dovey."

"Something is wrong with your eyes. Why not have your little sister pick out some glasses for you?"

"Yeah, I'd rather not. I'm probably going to get glasses this year again from Nakuru. Fake ones, of course. God, she sure has some weird interests..." Santa Claus let out a sigh.

...I feel like that misunderstanding was cleared up fairly quickly. I mean, I'm glad that it did. I really can't see myself being Ichigo-san's boyfriend. Just the thought of that gives me shivers.

"That reminds me, you both are fellow third-years, right?"

"Yup. Even in the same class."

"Huh..."

No clue which class, but their homeroom teacher must be going through a lot of trouble. Having these two in the same class sounds like a solid reason for me to go beg for a different class. Constant stomach pain on the menu, I bet.

"Then again, she rarely comes to school."

“Can’t help it, I am a maid of the Suzutsuki Family, so I have my duties at the residence.”

“Huh. It’s great to be passionate about your work, but show up for the club activities from time to time. Can’t keep them under control without the president.”

“As long as the vice president is there, everything should be fine. Also, the club activities now are different from what I originally envisioned.”

“Huh? Really?”

“It’s all your fault. Because of you, the club turned into some circus.”

“What’s it matter as long as it’s fun? We do some handicraft work from time to time, you know.”

“And I know you haven’t improved at all since you joined the club. Even though you’re the vice president.”

“S-S-Shut up! I was always bad with that sort of stuff! I was never good with small and fine work!”

“Then why did you join the handicrafts club...”

Go, tell her more, Ichigo-san. I wholeheartedly agree. No matter how you look at it, Schrö-senpai isn’t cut out for the handicrafts club. She’s a much better fit for the sports-related clubs. Of course, same goes for my little sister.

“But, isn’t it fine as long as you’re having fun? You two seem fairly close at least.”

As club president and vice president, their exchanges are friendly. I’ve never seen Ichigo-san talking this much to anybody but Suzutsuki or her other servants.

“...We’re not that close.”

“Eh? Really?”

“Hey now, don’t be so down about it, Ichigo. We’re besties, right?”

“Besties? I call you a rotten connection.”

“Hmm...well, we’ve been in the same class since our second year. Ahh, so many good memories.”

“...So many?” I blurted out a question.

Now I’m a bit curious about their past together. Maybe then I would be able to grasp the truth of this cursed club. No, I actually really don’t want to know.

“Ohh, great question, Onii-chan. The moving encounter between the two of us is a blockbuster.”

“Are you sure about that...”

“Basically, it fills around 40 pages of a novel.”

“Now that is something I want to avoid.”

“Well, I can’t give you the full details now. But, my number one impression is when Ichigo was doing some handicraft work after classes on the day we met...”

“Handicraft work?”

Huh, that’s a bit unexpected. To think there was such a memory between them. I’m actually getting emotional right now...

“It sure was crazy back then. She half destroyed the home economics room.”

“.....”

Oh lord, this isn’t moving at all. I’m just shocked now. And, how could you even achieve something like this?

“Well, that’s how Ichigo and I became friends.”

“Judging from what you just told me, it sure didn’t seem that way.”

“Course not. As proof of that, we sometimes head out to have fun.”

“Have fun...”

“For example, karaoke.”

“That really is normal!”

But, is this really fine? I feel like they might get banned from the karaoke box. If I was the employee, I’d put them on the blacklist.

“Well, at karaoke, Ichigo only sings the oldest songs. Her sense is quite old school.”

“And you only sing anime songs, Schrö.”

“Hm? Hey now, don’t you dare make fun of anime songs. There are no better songs to get hyped up.”

“You’re the only one who gets excited.”

“!?”

“You’re even recreating the choreography, dancing like an idol, right?”

“S-S-S-Stop that! Don’t reveal my karaoke style! Damn it, even though you’re always singing as well...” Schrö-senpai bit her lip with a sulking tone.

Hmmm, I wonder why, I really feel like seeing Schrö-senpai dancing to anime songs, and Ichigo-san singing her old-school songs. Still these two sure are close, I’m feeling a bit jealous.

“Ah, right.” Ichigo-san sounded like she remembered something, and reached for the bag with the thread inside.

“I also have a present for you, Schrö.”

“Eh!? Seriously!?”

“YES. Just like the scarf, I tried my best making it. It’s an early Christmas present, but...do you want it?”

“H-Hmmm...Well, if you’re that adamant on it, I guess I can take it.”

“You don’t have to go all tsundere now.”

“Shut up! Don’t call me a tsundere! ...So, what’s the present?” Schrö-senpai seemed a bit salty, but still asked with a bit of excitement in her voice.

That sight of hers was adorable, and a bit cute. On top of that, the juxtaposition of Santa Claus asking for a present sure was funny.

“Don’t panic, I’m giving it to you right now.” The maid looked through the bag, and what appeared out of it..

—Was a collar. Not to mention one you’d put on a cat or dog.

“.....” Santa Claus had her gaze glued to it, not moving an inch.

I guess even she is shocked about that.

“...Just kidding.” Ichigo-san smiled. “That was a joke.” She said with her usual robotic voice, and once again put her hand into the bag.

Now, some gloves appeared. Apparently she really was just joking.

“Ohhh, thanks a bunch, Ichigo!”

“I had some thread leftover, so I made them.”

“More than enough. I’m really happy.....But, what’s with these gloves, they have paws.”

“You like cats, right?”

“I sure do, but...Well, as long as it’s cute, nothing else matters! They’re so fluffy as well!”

“By the way, you need to undress while wearing those.”

“Why!?”

“Naked with cat paw gloves...and a collar. Perfect. There’s no better clothes out there. Starting today, you will be Catdinger-san.”

“Who’s that!? Why not have your master wear that for you?”

“H-Have Kanade-ojousama wear that...?”

“Doesn’t have to be with gloves, but like fully naked with a scarf, or with thread wrapped around her.”

“I never even thought about that...Merry Christmas...” Ichigo-san muttered with a devilish smile.

Um, excuse me, can somebody call the nurse? We need to give this maid some treatment quickly. I call it the KANADE disease. It’s a severe disease that slowly makes the mind deteriorate.

“By the way.” There, Schrö-senpai stuffed the gloves into her pocket, and turned towards me. “How are your injuries looking, Onii-chan?”

“Ah, I just cut my palm, so.”

Luckily, it wasn’t that threatening, so it shouldn’t negatively influence my daily life. It does hurt a bit, but I’m used to things on this level thanks to my family.

“Hm, glad to hear that. I was just a bit curious.”

“...Curious?”

“Yeah. After all, I’m sort-of related to it, right?”

“No, that’s not...”

It sort of is true that her words led to me getting injured like this. Specifically, at that shrine, when she screamed at me.

“Don’t worry about it. If anything, I’m thankful. Because of you, I feel like I finally moved forward.”

“R-Really? Then it’s fine.” Schrö-senpai gave a bashful response.

That’s right. It’s thanks to her. Without her words of encouragement, I might have not achieved anything. I probably would have hesitated forever. But, because she gave me an earful...

“Be careful alright, Onii-chan.”

“Eh?”

“Both Kureha and I told you, right...No matter what wall stands ahead of us, we have to keep moving forward. Because...that’s normal. Everybody has to think about that once.”

“.....”

“But, not everybody can do it. Thinking about it in your head, and actually executing it in real life are two different things. Be it a child, or an adult, there’s a lot of people who can’t do that, and stay on the ground forever. I bet there’s people who don’t even understand my words.”

“.....”

I felt a shiver running down my back. After all, not even a few hours ago, I was exactly that. If you haven’t fallen down once, you probably wouldn’t understand Schrö-senpai’s words. Because I was scolded by her, I was forced to get up, and grasp the meaning behind her words.

“That’s why, make sure you don’t end up that way, you hear me? No matter how lame you may be, you move forward. No matter how people may ridicule you, as long as you’re in the right, you believe in it—” Schrö-senpai showed a bashful smile. “After all, the people who move forward no matter how lame they look—turned out to be the coolest.”

“...Yes, I think so as well.”

Or rather, I started to feel that way. And it’s all thanks to the small but super cool senior of mine. If not for her pushing my back, I surely would have stayed on the ground.

“Hm? Schrö, what did you do to Odd Jobs-san?”

“Hm? Nothing, really. Just breathed some life into him.”

“Breathed some life into him? So, you gave him a deep kiss?”

“Why would you interpret it that way!? Don’t plant nonsense like that!” Schrödinger-san was fuming with anger.

However, because of the costume she was wearing, she didn’t have much impact. Rather, it made her look even more comical. Thinking about it now, she’s cool, but also cute.

“.....”

But, I see...It’s Christmas soon. Seeing her appearance, I once again realized that. It’s winter now, that season has arrived upon us. The second term will soon end, with winter break approaching, and then the third term.

“Hm?”

Right as I was lost in thought, a phone noise filled the hallway. It sounded like a familiar tune, but I don’t know the name of the song. I think it’s an old one.

“Ah, a mail from Kanade-ojousama.” Ichigo-san said, taking out her phone.

So that’s her message noise. She really likes Showa songs.

“Ichigo, it’s bad manners to use your phone in the hospital.”

“Sorry, I forgot to turn it off.” She said, and checked her phone screen.

Might be something urgent, who knows. Still, contact from Suzutsuki, huh. My heart started beating, and it most likely is because of that previous incident. Namely, the confession. I was confessed to by her...

“Odd Jobs-san.”

Suddenly, Ichigo-san turned towards me. And then, with not a change in expression she spoke up.

“Go home without me.”

“Eh? You’ll go home ahead?”

We came here with Ichigo-san’s car. Still, this is pretty tough of a distance to walk to get back to the flat...

“NO.”

However, Ichigo-san denied my thoughts.

“I have to return to the residence. That is Kanade-ojousama’s wish.”

“What?”

What’s up with that? So, she’ll leave the flat? Well, originally it’s only been Suzutsuki and Konoe living there.

“That being the case, farewell.” She bluntly started walking with the plastic bag in hand.

But, halfway, she stopped and turned around again.

“Odd Jobs-san.” She called out my name. “Don’t make Kanade-ojousama sad, please.” She left these words behind, and walked away.

For some reason, her back looked a bit defeated.

Chapter 2: Sakamachi Summit

It was currently 10.11pm. After walking for around thirty minutes, I finally made it back home from the hospital. Or rather, I made it back to Masamune's room. Ever since my beloved home burned down back in September, currently in the middle of rebuilding, I've been living there. It seems to be done for the most part, so it should be completed once the third term rolls around. That's why, I'll only be living here a bit longer—in this flat.

As I stood in front of Masamune's apartment, I was thinking about that. A lot happened, huh. I lived on the balcony for around a month, the Suzutsuki Revolution happened, Kureha ran away from home, I had my fight with Konoe...and then, the two confessions from Masamune and Suzutsuki.

“...I need to give them both an answer.” I told myself, as I whispered.

That's right, living here with Masamune, and being neighbours with Konoe and Suzutsuki, it'll only be like this for a bit longer. That's why, I need to bring a conclusion to this—before moving back into my original home.

“Alright.”

I took a deep breath, and opened the front door. Masamune should be with Schrö-senpai, so she probably isn't—

“...Hm?”

Hold on. Schrö-senpai mentioned that Nakuru and Kureha praised her Santa appearance. So, what about Masamune then? Maybe she simply didn't like the costume, but I highly doubt that, knowing how much of a fashion fan she is. So basically, what if she slipped away from the party mid-way?

Doubts filled my mind as I entered the front entrance, spotting Masamune's shoes. Guess she was home after all. What will she say after seeing the bandage on my arm, I wonder? She will probably

give me an earful out of worry and anger. Either way, I'm starving right now. I haven't gotten anything to eat since noon. Since Kureha stuffed her stomach with cake at the cafe, there was nothing left for me. Of course, money was also a problem.

Well, there should be something in the fridge, I bet. I walked through the dark hallway without putting on the lights, when I spotted the presence of someone in the living room. Must be Masamune.

"I'm back." I said, and set foot into the living room.

Immediately after, I was at a loss for words.

"My, welcome back, Jirou-kun." A dignified voice greeted me—Suzutsuki Kanade.

She's our neighbour, and a noble lady that looked great with black twin sidetails.

"Welcome back, Jirou."

The next person who greeted me was Konoe Subaru, a girl crossdressing as a male butler. They sat in the living room like it was the most obvious thing in the world.

"....."

Now hold on. What is this situation? Why are those two here? I mean, it wouldn't be weird for them to stop by, but why this late?

"Ah, stupid chicken, you're home?"

As I was left bewildered, a voice called out to me from the kitchen. The one who joined us in the living room was Usami Masamune, carrying three cups on a plate. It seems like she was making tea for the group.

"Thank you, Usami-san. But, hurry up, the second battle will start soon."

"I know that. Also, why was the punishment for the first round making tea for everyone?"

“Sorry, Usami, I actually wanted to make the tea as I’m the butler, but...”

“Ah, you don’t have to worry about it, Subaru-sama! I was the one who lost after all!”

“That’s right, it’s all your fault for losing.”

“Why don’t you show some restraint, huh!?”

“The howling of a loser, I see.”

“Urk...acting like you’re above others again...I won’t lose next time!” Masamune steamed in anger, sitting down at the table. On the table were the seven of hearts, of diamonds, of clubs, and of spades.

“Fufu, would you like to join us, Jirou-kun?” Suzutsuki put away the eight of hearts, and spoke up.

...No. Rather than mixing in...

“What are you folks doing here?” I threw in a retort.

Konoe, Suzutsuki, Masamune, all together. Were they always this close? I mean, I’m fine if they made up, but why are they playing cards here?

“Isn’t that obvious?” Suzutsuki said with no hesitation. “We’ve reached a profound exchange.”

“...Exchange?”

“That’s right. That’s why we’ll be together for a bit longer.”

“.....”

Um, what’s this about? For a bit longer? So they’ll be staying over tonight? I don’t mind, but since we have classes tomorrow, I don’t think it would be the best to stay up too long.

“Suzutsuki Kanade, it’s hard to understand with that explanation. Can I just say it?”

“Oh my, do you plan on giving me orders, Poor Lady-san.”

“Shut up! We only played daifugō for one round!”

“To think you’d even become the daihinmin in the game, on top of being poor in reality...”

“S-Shut up, you millionaire wench! Why not give up some of your money in the game at least!”

“Usami, you’re not explaining anything...” Konoe said, putting down the nine of diamonds.

And then, she turned towards me.

“We decided that we’d be living here for a while.”

She threw a bombshell at me.....Hold on. That came out of nowhere. Live together? If I were to put that into a meaning, then...

“That’s why...Jirou?”

As I was bewildered, Konoe gave me a somewhat bashful gaze.

“Please take care of us for a while.”



♀ × ♂

This might be a bit off-topic, but I don't really enjoy playing cards. Even a long time ago, we played cards a lot, but that was more of a violent punching game than anything. Like we were out to kill each other. The thrill was crazy at least. But even so, it's at least better than whatever mess of a situation this is.

“Come on, can somebody explain this to me already?”

We were still sitting in Masamune’s living room. Holding the cards in my hand, I asked with a bit of confusion filling my voice. By the way, this is our third round of playing cards, being Old Maid. As expected, the second match ended with Suzutsuki’s overwhelming victory, Masamune being last again. Challenging this rich lady to a game of brains really is futile after all...But, this isn’t the time for that. According to Suzutsuki, they are playing cards to deepen their bonds since they’re living together, but...

“Jirou-kun, it’s just as Subaru said a few moments ago.” Suzutsuki put down two cards. “We decided to live here in this apartment. There’s a certain reason for that.”

“A reason?”

When I returned a question, Suzutsuki smiled at me.

“Come on, I just confessed to you, right?”

“.....”

Um, Suzutsuki-san? Why are you just declaring that so nonchalantly? Not to mention while playing Old Maid.

“So, Usami-san also confessed to Jirou-kun, right?”

“Wha...How do you know about that!?”

“I heard about it from Subaru. Quite a passionate confession, huh? ‘I want to become your family!’, was it? Not to mention that kiss right after...”

“Gaaaaaaah shut uuuuuuuuuup!” Masamune screamed with a beet red face.

This will probably be seen as Suzutsuki’s third consecutive victory. To think she’d set up such an off-side battle. This isn’t the time to be playing Old Maid, she’s the card nobody wants to hold.

“S-Sorry, Usami, if only I hadn’t told her...”

“...No, you don’t have to apologize, Subaru-sama. She would have found out eventually either way.”

“Exactly. I would have seen through it anyway. Everybody could tell that you have feelings for Jirou-kun.”

“You be quiet already! Also, just continue the explanation!” The nasty rabbit pouted in anger.

“Got it.” Suzutsuki nodded. “Jirou-kun, before you came here, we talked about all sorts of stuff. As a result of that, we decided to live here together—In order to fix your gynophobia.”

“Fix?”

“I mean, you said it at the sports festival, right? With your current condition, you can’t start dating a girl, is what you told us, remember?”

“I mean, I sure did, but...”

On the way home, that’s what I told those three, yeah. But, that makes sense. After all, with my gynophobia, I can’t even properly hold hands with a girl. How would I be able to enjoy love?

“That’s why...” Suzutsuki said, leisurely putting down her last pair. “From now on, the three of us will work together to cure your gynophobia.”

“.....”

Even though we were already in December, my entire body suddenly started sweating. Of course, all their previous treatment for me never ended well. Konoe is an airhead, Suzutsuki is a sadist, and Masamune is an aggressive type. Their vectors of treatment are all over the place, it doesn’t even really count as treatment. And now those three are working together? Please, lord help me. They’re about as terrifying as the Black Tri-stars in Gun*am. No doubt, they’ll be using me for their own benefit.

“It’s simple. If we’re all going to help you fix your gynophobia, it would be best for us to live together.”

“I get the reason, but...are you sure about that?”

“About what?”

“I mean...”

Although this isn't some shoujo manga, both Suzutsuki and Masamune confessed to me, so wouldn't they bet on bad terms?

“Stupid chicken, were you thinking that we'd create some sort of battlefield here? Of course we wouldn't.” Masamune took a short break, and continued. “If we did, it would cause a war.”

“.....”

Damn. War, she says. This suddenly turned into a battle manga. But, war? There's no way that...

“Then, let me ask you. Do you want to see us fight for real?”

“Eh...”

“If it came to that, Suzutsuki Kanade surely wouldn't hold back herself. She'll surely set up some pranks, and rely on her servants.”

“...”

“And then, I'll ask for help from the other handicraft club members. The vice prez and Sakamachi surely would help. What do you think would happen then?”

“.....”

I tried simulating the scenario Masamune-san just brought up. A fight between Suzutsuki and Masamune...in other words, it's the Suzutsuki family versus the members of Rouran Academy's handicrafts club.

“...Hell no.”

I sought out peace. I definitely don't want to see such a scene, even if I have to die to prevent it. This isn't just any battlefield, there will be casualties. And the first one will be me trying to stop them.

“Right? That’s why we decided to first heal your gynophobia. We don’t want to have any needless war either.”

“Yeah, not with this kind of condition I’m in.”

So to put a clean end to all of this, I first need to get over my gynophobia, huh. For that, we’ll live together. Still, living together with three girls? This sounds like it could come straight out of a light novel. I’m feeling anxious. Of course, the reason is simple. Konoe Subaru, Suzutsuki Kanade, and Usami Masamune—all of these three are just far too special. They are cute, alright, but I can see a chemical reaction happening with them.

“...Hm?”

Hold on a second. Thinking about it rationally, we can’t sleep in the same room, right? After all...there’s not enough rooms available. This is a high-class apartment alright, but definitely not a space that would allow for four people to live in. Somebody would have to sleep on the balcony, and naturally that would be me. I already experienced it after all. However, it’s December right now. I might die from freezing.

“Don’t worry, Jirou-kun.”

Suzutsuki must have guessed what I was thinking, as she showed me a calm smile. She really looked like she was enjoying herself, alright.

“.....”

This is bad. Our Suzutsuki is bad. Eh? What regenerative ability is that? Before I left for the hospital, she was all like ‘I can’t smile anymore’, and yet she now acts like that. I’m the one who can’t smile, alright? Also, whenever she shows me that smile, I just know nothing good will come out of it.

“Subaru, you can skip the game, so would you please explain it to Jirou-kun?”

“Understood, my lady.”

With a racing heart, I looked at Suzutsuki’s butler. And then, Konoe

took my hand, saying ‘Let’s go, Jirou’, and stood up...Wait, we’re leaving the living room?

“Over here.”

We walked down the hallway, ignoring the darkness around us as we walked ahead, only for Konoe to turn on the light switch, illuminating the darkness. Immediately after—I spotted a large hole with a 60cm radius right in the wall. From there, I could see the apartment next to ours all too clear.

“.....”

...What in the ever-living hell am I looking at. Why’d they open up a goddamn hole in the wall?

“U-Um, Konoe? What is this about?” I pointed at the hole with a quivering finger.

To that, Konoe let out a groan.

“You also think that we should have made it bigger, right? That would have made it easier to pass through...”

“I’m certainly not worried about the size of the hole!”

Why is there a hole here!? No, calm down, me. Is this what Suzutsuki was talking about? Thanks to this hole, they can come inside our apartment whenever they want? It’s like two apartments turned into one big one. Who did this...

“It was a lot of work to open up this hole.”

“So you’re the maniac who did this!?”

“The problem was the wall, it was pretty thick, and...”

“That clearly wasn’t the problem!”

There’s plenty other problems here, alright. Remember that this is a cheap apartment. Are you sure about just doing renovations on your own? I can tell you’d lose in a court case.

“Don’t you worry, the lady has already confirmed everything with the owner.”

“Confirmed...Just what kind of negotiations did she go through?”

“According to her, she ‘used last year’s New Year’s money’.”

“That easy!?”

Also, she can resolve troubles of that level this easily? How much? How much money does she get? Please, bless some of us poor folks with it...For example, a certain classmate of yours had his house burn down (me), and he needs some of that.

“That being said, the problem has been resolved.” Konoe puffed out her chest in confidence.

Damn it, that is quite the severe before-after I’m looking at. Just as Konoe said, the problem of space has been resolved, but...

“...Hm?”

Wait wait wait. Now that I think about it, there’s a much bigger problem than that, right?

“Hey, Konoe, are you sure about living together with Masamune?”

“Hm? What do you mean?”

“I mean...she doesn’t know that you’re a girl, right?”

For certain reasons, Konoe Subaru is forced to crossdress as a male butler while attending school. And, that secret cannot be revealed to anybody. If they really end up living here with us, then Masamune would eventually—

—“It’s fine.” However, Konoe denied my assumptions. “Usami already knows my secret.”

“...Excuse me?”

Now hol’ up. Basically, Masamune knows that Konoe is a girl?

“On top of that, she promised to keep it a secret. That’s why, no need to worry.”

“R-Really now.”

I was surprised, sure, but also thought about it. If another student found out that Konoe is a girl, she will be forced to quit as a butler. However, if that secret is found out, and the people at the Suzutsuki Family don’t find out, they’re still safe. I’m the perfect example for that. Still, to think that Masamune knew about Konoe’s secret. Maybe something happened while I wasn’t there?

“How do you feel about my reform plan?”

With these thoughts in my mind, we returned to the living room, running into Suzutsuki smiling at me. She’s back. Devil Suzutsuki has been revived. The devil was whispering into my ear.

“My, what happened, Jirou-kun? You look like you’re about to break out in tears.”

“Well, you know...”

What is this. I should be happy that Suzutsuki has returned to normal, and is even more honest with me, but I’m having trouble holding back the tears.

“Now then, since we explained the situation to Jirou-kun, I guess it’s time to stop playing games.”

“Ah, not fair, Suzutsuki Kanade! You plan on running away on a victory!?”

“I don’t mind continuing, but you won’t be able to win against me.”

“Urk...F-Feeling all confident because of two victories...” Masamune tightly grasped the cards.

Stop it, nasty rabbit. It’s impossible to win against Suzutsuki in a gamble. Playing Old Maid made it obvious, but her poker face is unbreakable. At the very least, having any mental warfare with her is no joke.

“Don’t be so frustrated. Or, do you simply want to play games?”

“Huh? What do you mean?”

“Didn’t you say so two weeks ago during the double date? You wanted to be my friend, right?”

“!”

“Thank you. You really are kind. To think you’d try to prolong this game so that we could get along.”

“~~~! Y-You’re wrong, that’s not what I...”

“That’s Usami-san for you, what a wonderful tsundere act.”

“Don’t call me a tsundere!”

“Then, can I call you Usamin?”

“Wha...!” Masamune opened and closed her mouth in shock.

Can’t blame her. Suzutsuki never addressed her that way. At least not the normal Suzutsuki, the past Derechuki-san did.

“W-W-W-Why would you do that!?”

“I mean, you want to be friends with me, right?”

“Urk...I-I want to be friends with you as well, but...”

“Fufu, Usamiiiiin~”

“Ah, why are you suddenly clinging to me!”

“It’s because you’re so cute.”

“Who the hell are you!? Ah, stop, don’t touch me in weird places...!”
Being clung to by Suzutsuki, Masamune howled in embarrassment.

This is probably Suzutsuki’s way of expressing affection. She surely must be thankful to Masamune for wanting to be friends...Well, part of it is probably her being playful as always.

“My lady, the night has progressed, so I advise we continue.”

“Ah, you’re right. Thank you, Subaru. Come on, you thank her as well, Usami-san.” Suzutsuki moved away from Masamune like nothing happened.

Having been freed, the nasty rabbit let out a flustered ‘T-Thank you very much...Shubaru-shama...’, gasping for air. Keep on fighting, Masamune. If you don’t put up with this, you won’t be able to become friends with Suzutsuki. She really loves playing with others after all. Since I’m one of her other toys, I can tell you as much.

“Now then, let’s move on to the main topic.” Suzutsuki called out to me. “We will now begin the very first Sakamachi Summit.”

“.....”

Now hold on, what kind of summit is this?

“Don’t give us such a confused look, Jirou-kun. It’s a summit to fix your gynophobia. And, we have only one goal—to cure this gynophobia before the third term starts.”

“The third term...”

If my memory serves right, the third term begins on the 5th of January. Since we’re currently on the 5th of December, it’s roughly one month left.

“That’s right. I think it’s better to decide on a time limit. That raises motivation.”

“Ah, amazing, Subaru. Usami-san just agreed to my opinion. Is she finally opening up to me?”

“No, it’s still too early to say that, my lady. From what I heard, tsunderes can be quite contradictory.”

“Really? What a shame. But, that’s why you want to make them open up, right? I’ll try my best.”

“...Are you guys even trying to take this seriously?”

“Come on, don’t be such a bummer, Usamin.”

“Again, don’t call me Usamin!” Masamune shouted.

Will this be okay, I wonder? The walls here may be soundproof, but what if our neighbours...Wait, they are our neighbours, right.

“Y-You alright, Usami? Your face is beet red.”

“Subaru-sama...I’m happy that you’re worrying about me, but please don’t just join along with Suzutsuki Kanade!”

“Eh? But, I was just acting as always...”

“.....”

Masamune stayed quiet for a moment, and then turned towards me, asking ‘Hey, stupid chicken, is Subaru-sama an airhead or something?’. Ohh, so she’s finally realized? However, that’s not the scary part. In fact, Konoe subconsciously is playing along with Suzutsuki’s sadistic tendencies, which causes an odd chemistry. That’s master and servant for you.

“Anyway, let’s continue. For now, our plan is to cure your gynophobia by the time the third term starts. The question is how.”

“Right. In this past half year, we tried out a lot, but we never managed to fully cure your gynophobia...” Konoe started thinking.

Just as she said, we’ve been attempting quite a lot of strategies against my gynophobia ever since we became closer in April. Thanks to that, I’ve started to improve quite significantly, but it feels like the final stretch is lacking.

“.....”

No, wait. Just recently—Or rather, today, I found a hint to completely fix the gynophobia...

“Huh? But, I think that his gynophobia has gotten a lot better, right? Even though the stupid chicken carried Sakamachi for quite some time, he was fine.”

“...Ah.”

That’s right. Sakamachi Kureha...after she hugged me today, I feel like my gynophobia has improved quite a bit. My gynophobia basically started because of my fear towards girls...towards the women of my family. But, Kureha was different today. When she clung to me, crying because of her broken heart—she was just a normal girl. Rather than scaring me, I simply felt the desire to protect her. Because I became conscious of that...my gynophobia improved drastically, I think.

“Really? I don’t know why, but...I’m glad to hear that.” Konoe said with a smile.

“.....”

That expression made my heart skip a beat. It felt like it’s been a long time since I got to see Konoe’s natural smile.

“After all, the fact that you were able to carry Kureha-chan for a longer time must mean that your gynophobia is close to being cured, right?”

“W-Well, I guess so?”

This whole curing program over the past half of a year, adding together the change of my perception when it comes to Kureha, my gynophobia is improving. Hmm...it doesn’t fully feel real, but it’s amazing. I had to suffer from this condition for years after all.

“But, that means we have to confirm it right now.” Suzutsuki Kanade opened her mouth, showing a grin, as she looked at me.

“.....”

—Run. That single word subconsciously appeared in my mind. There’s only one reason. Whenever I see that rich lady make a face like that, my body instinctively tells me to run away. That’s why I tried to get up from my seat, but...

“Nope. I won’t let you run.”

“!?”

Out of nowhere, Suzutsuki suddenly appeared next to me—Ahhhhhh, why is she suddenly clinging to my arm like that!?

“H-Hey! Suzutsuki Kanade! What are you doing!?” Masamune screamed.

With quivering fingertips, she pointed at Suzutsuki clinging to me.

“Fufu, Usami-san, why are you panicking like that?”

“Because you’re clinging to the stupid chicken like that!”

“I mean, this is the fastest way to confirm, right? Seeing how much Jirou-kun’s gynophobia has improved.”

“I-I get the logic behind it, but...!” Masamune groaned.

I can see where she’s coming from. She’s trying to figure out how far my gynophobia has improved. Even if it means testing it directly.

“.....”

I mean, it might sound like she is sacrificing herself for the greater good, but I bet she’s simply enjoying my reactions, nothing more. Look at her face.

“Not to mention that there’s nothing weird about me hugging him like this.” She said with a smile. “After all, I like Jirou-kun.”

“.....”

...Somebody tell me. What even is her thought process anymore? How can she say that so easily? Her mental fortitude is no joke. Is her heart made out of diamond?

“~~~! S-S-Suzutsuki Kanade, what are you saying!?”

“I’m just speaking the truth, you know?”

“B-But...”

“Ah, well, to be perfectly honest, it’s more ‘Love’ than ‘Like’, I guess. Because...being this close to Jirou-kun...my heart is racing.”

“Wha...”

“Hey, Jirou-kun...is your heart pounding like mine?”

Eeeeeek, she’s whispering into my ear! At the same time, Suzutsuki wrapped her slender arms around my right one...Gaaah, I can feel her breasts! Her soft sensation is being pressed onto me! Even a monk running away from home would be nervous at this!

“Fufu, it seems like your gynophobia really has improved, Jirou-kun. You seem just fine like this, and your nose hasn’t started bleeding.”

“!”

“Maybe I can hug you even stronger now?”

“!?”

“Hey, how are you feeling, Jirou-kun?” She asked me with a sweet voice, smiling like she was enjoying herself.

“.....”

Deretsuki-san has recovered. She is like a phoenix. Not to mention that the dere power has gone up drastically compared to before.

“Jirou-kun, I can’t tell if you just stay quiet.” She looked up at me, waiting for a response.

...Ahhhh. Deretsuki-san is no joke. Since it’s been a while, I was once again reminded of how terrifying this woman is. Why not make her a private investigator at the CIA? No matter who, any terrorist would fall victim to her charm. Either way, this situation is bad. Even if this is to cure my gynophobia, being embraced like this right in front of Konoe and Masamune is far too embarrassing. My heart is going to explode before I get to curing anything. I need to make it out of this...!

“Wait a moment!”

There, a sharp voice rang out. Ohh, Masamune comes to the rescue! She can tell that I'm in a pinch, and is moving to rescue me. Please, get me out of here...

"Suzutsuki Kanade."

However, the second she opened her mouth to continue, I thought my heart stopped for a second.

"It's not fair that you're doing it all alone."

"....."

Now hold on, Masamune-san. What are you...Gaaaah, why are you clinging to my other arm, you nasty rabbit!

"Y-You! Get away!"

"Definitely not!"

"Why are you so stubborn about it!"

"B-Because..." Masamune blushed furiously, and continued. "I also like you, stupid chicken!"

"....."

Oh lord help me. She probably was agitated because of Suzutsuki's actions, but she sure is aggressive now.

"My, Usami-san, aren't you quite assertive?"

"It's...it's because you were doing this sort of stuff!"

"What's it matter? I like him after all."

"I-I do too!"

"Hmmm. By the way, what do you like about Jirou-kun?"

Suddenly, Suzutsuki brought up that question.

""Wha?"" Both Masamune and I gasped in unison.

No no no, what is she asking in such a situation, this damn rich lady?

“W-Why would I have to say that!?”

“I mean, you like him, right? You must have a reason for that.”

“T-That’s true, but...”

“I can say it, you know?”

“.....!?” Masamune’s eyes shot open in shock.

“Jirou-kun.”

And then, while still clinging to me, she looked up into my eyes—

“I like how funny you are.”

“.....”

Is it just my imagination, or did she just say that the reason she likes me is because I’m funny?

“Whenever I’m with you, I never feel bored. You get wrapped up in all sorts of interesting trouble.”

“...Um, Suzutsuki-san, the reason this trouble happens is mostly related to you, I believe...”

“That’s right, but just ignore that.”

“Like hell I can!?”

That’s the most important part! She better not have forgotten everything she’s done to me so far. Has she gone senile or something?

“But, you always respond to my pranks in the most interesting ways, you know.”

“I’m not responding because I want to, alright.”

“I think we’d be a great combo.”

“You want to become a comedic duo or something?”

“Eh? What are you talking about? I want to become your girlfriend.”

“Please, can you stop saying all of that so nonchalantly!?”

Suzutsuki Kanade is going at full speed ahead right now. What is with her? Her full throttle right now makes the two weeks she took off from a school a joke. Or, maybe she just built up a lot of stress, but it's not helping me for sure.

“Now it's your turn, Usami-san.”

“Wha...!”

“I put up with my embarrassment to confess my feelings, and yet you won't?”

“~~~!”

“Come on, Usamin?”

“S-S-S-Shut up! Don't call me Usamin! I'll say it! I just have to say it, right!?” She blushed, and screamed.

Following that, she looked at me with drenched eyes.

“—I-I like how kind you are.”

“.....” I grew silent.

Including that, Konoe and Suzutsuki also didn't say a word. I didn't think I would get such a maiden-like answer back, to be perfectly honest.

“Because...Even though you complain, you still stay as my friend... and staying with you gives me peace of mind...That's why I want to be your family, you know...”

“Usami-san, I didn't tell you to give us such a detailed explanation...”

“Ah...It's fine! I wanted to tell him about that anyway!” Masamune said, her face beet red, as she looked at me. “That's why...I love you,

stupid chicken!”

“_____”



Crap. Seriously, what is going on with this situation...Why are you two girls clinging to me, confessing? Is this all just a hallucination? Maybe I've gone crazy for good now? Either way, this is bad. My gynophobia made leaps in improving, but because I'm being attacked

like this, the symptoms are popping up again. At this rate, I'll pass out. Before that, I need to get help—

“—Jirou.”

There, an alto voice spoke up, belonging to none other than Konoe herself. She looked at me, being clung to by Suzutsuki and Masamune. And then—

“...!?”

She suddenly clung to my waist.

“K...Konoe!?”

I was baffled. Normally, Konoe would not do something like that, I'm sure of it.

“—!”

No, calm down. Back in October, I confessed to her, and was rejected. After that, in November, we got into a fight, and distanced ourselves from each other...But, after coming to Suzutsuki's room, we've gotten a bit closer, I think.

“.....”

That's right, there was something I wanted to tell her.

‘Once I'm done talking with Suzutsuki, I need to tell you something as well.’

That's what I said. And, what did Konoe respond with?

‘I also have something to talk about with you.’

“.....”

Something she wants to talk about with me? Is that possibly...

“Jirou, I...” She seemed embarrassed, as she spoke up, still clinging to me.

I could feel my heart shaking at that gesture. And then—

“...!?”

Blood came gushing out of my nose. I guess I reached my limit with that.

“Wah, stupid chicken!?”

“I see, it definitely has gotten better, but being surrounded by too many girls immediately activated it, huh?”

“Hey, Suzutsuki Kanade! Don’t calmly analyze the situation!”

“Right. Our clothes will be drenched by his blood at this rate.”

“That’s not what I meant!”

“Ah, Usami-san, you were pretty cute just now.”

“Wha...I-I-I’m not happy at all even if you tell me that!”

“That’s Usamin for you~”

“How many more times do I have to tell you to not call me that way!?”

Suzutsuki and Masamune clung to me, causing a ruckus. Um, you two? If you can afford to have that kind of conversation, maybe get away from me first? At this rate, I’ll be sent right back to the hospital, and I really don’t feel like that right now. I’m going to pass out because of blood loss.

“...Are you okay, Jirou?” Konoe offered me a tissue from the tissue box, as she gave me a worried gaze.

At the same time, a bit of regret filled her expression. Just now, what was she about to say?

“.....”

That reminds me, after Kureha confessed to her, she said something interesting.

‘I’m sure that—you must have someone you like as well, Konoe-senpai.’

The meaning behind those words...what is it?

“Now then, since we figured out the current state of Jirou-kun’s gynophobia, we have to work hard to cure it from now on. We’re working on limited time after all.” Suzutsuki said, finally letting me go.

...Well yeah, I guess that takes priority right now. This winter will be the final part of my rehabilitation program. Namely, I’ll be living together with Konoe Subaru, Suzutsuki Kanade, and Usami Masamune.

“.....”

But, I don’t think it’s that bad of a thing. After all, we’re finally together again, after we had once drifted apart. It’s the noisy but comforting daily life I wished for. So, if it could continue for a bit longer—

“...Hey, Masamune, can you let go of me already...?” I went and said that.

After all, she was still clinging to me, despite Suzutsuki having already moved away.

“...Stupid chicken.”

However, she still kept holding on to me, and continued.

“Go on a date with me.”

“.....”

Everyone went quiet when they heard these words. I did, Konoe did, and so did Suzutsuki. Yet, Masamune showed me a serious expression like never before, and continued.

“Go on a date with me on Christmas.”

Chapter 3: Silver Christmas

December 24th rolled around. There probably isn't any person not knowing what today is about. Indeed, it's Christmas Eve, the Holy Night. Couples all over town flirting around, children preparing socks to get presents, adults walking through town to look for presents—it was a noisy to cheerful night. By the way, it was a custom of the Sakamachi Family to enjoy hot pot together.

Mom is the type of person to really treasure these kinds of events, and since me and Kureha basically never had any plans, we'd snuggled up beneath the kotatsu to have our own type of Christmas. However, things most likely will be a bit different this year.

“Then, let's go.”

While stepping out of the flat, hit with the sharp cold air, Masamune said those words. Indeed, it's the 24th of December, so naturally I was on my date with Masamune. By the way, both Konoe and Suzutsuki were not around. They were having their own Christmas party at the Suzutsuki Residence. Or, they were something like a family so close enough. Rather than spending it with flat neighbours, it would be best to spend it with family...or so Ichigo-san told me in a mail, so that's where they are.

If anything, I forced them to go. It's Ichigo-san we're talking about after all. She prepared a Christmas present for Suzutsuki, so it would break her heart if she couldn't give her the present. That's why she sent me the mail, I'm sure. Well, the scariest part is that I don't remember ever telling her my contact information. I really need to find the leak, huh.

That being the case, both Suzutsuki and Konoe are off the grid. Suzutsuki gave me some profound 'Jirou-kun, it might be Christmas, but don't get too excited' comment, but I really don't have any energy for that. After all, it's been roughly three weeks since the four of us started living together. Recently, I finally feel like I've gotten used to this lifestyle, but it's my treatment repeating every single day,

which is rough. My HP is decreasing gradually.

While indulging in that lifestyle, we reached winter break. There's not much more time left. That's why we should probably put a bit more attention into the treatment, but...

"Well, today's date is one part of the treatment." Masamune said as we walked down the street.

She wore a coat colored like a snow rabbit, together with a warm-looking scarf. According to what she told me, she made that scarf herself. That's a handicraft club member for you.

"When you're together with a girl during Christmas, you'll surely get used to them."

"Well, I guess."

But...is it really just that? Going on a date during Christmas Eve sounds like part of the treatment process, but I feel like I've gotten used to girls plenty over the three weeks they were living together with me. That's why, there's no need to go on a date as just the two of us...

"....."

No, maybe she simply wanted to go on a date with me? I still remember her serious expression from three weeks ago, when she brought up the date. That still left me curious...

"Hmpf, why are you having such a complicated expression? We're going on a date because we're trying to fix your gynophobia, so it can't be helped. Or...do you not want to be with me?"

"I didn't mean it that way. Also, there's no way I would feel that way, you were taking care of me all the time, right?"

Of course, before reaching winter break, we high school students first had to go through—end-of-term exams. Because a lot happened lately, I've been forgetting about my studying, but Masamune helped me out a lot.

“Y-You don’t need to thank me for that. I wasn’t the only one teaching you.”

“I mean, Konoe and Suzutsuki helped me as well, but...”

Thinking about it, I only have people with good grades around me. Suzutsuki is at the top of the student year, and Masamune is receiving monetary support from the school because of her good grades, and Konoe is pretty high up in the ranking as well. Since they’ve basically been teaching me like private tutors, maybe I should pay them?

“But, your way of teaching was the easiest to understand.”

“R-Really? I might be a bit happy to hear that...”

“Yeah. After all, you’re putting a lot of effort into your studies. Since both Konoe and Suzutsuki are geniuses, they don’t really know how to teach others.”

I know it sounds weird coming from me, who was taught by them, but they’re both types who don’t need to study that much. Compared to that, Masamune continues her hard and stoic work to reach them. So, being taught by her is probably the best outcome. She understands the struggles of people who have to actively work hard to solve a problem. Like me, for example.

“Hey, stupid chicken. Are you saying that I’m dumber than Subaru-sama or Suzutsuki Kanade?”

“.....”

...Not good, I phrased that weirdly. At this rate, we’ll get a red Christmas instead of a white one.

“Y-You’re wrong, I was saying that you’re just working harder than them...”

“You don’t need to frantically make up excuses. I know that my specs are fundamentally inferior compared to theirs. That’s why I just have to make it up with hard work.”

“Sounds like someone should be a sports club member...”

Even though she's in the handicrafts club. I personally don't dislike that way of living. If anything, working really hard just raises affection from others. And, it's true that she was good at teaching.

“Maybe you should become a teacher in the future?”

“Huh!? W-W-W-Why would you think that!?”

“Why are you so shocked about it...”

“Because...a teacher, you know? The students would probably constantly run after me.”

“You think so?”

“They'd be like ‘Sensei, I want special one-on-one lessons!’, as they bring me to the infirmary, and push me down on the bed...”

“I feel like you have a grave misunderstanding about what it means to be a teacher!”

If we had such aggressive students, then we wouldn't have a problem with the birth rate in this country...Still, a teacher, huh. Basically, she'd be wearing a suit. Hmm...I wonder, since she has such great arms and legs, such teacher fashion might just look great on her. I'm not on Nakuru's level, but I'd love to see her wear glasses sometime.



“But, I can already see the students calling you Usamin.”

“Again with that nickname...I don’t think that such a cute nickname fits me.”

“What’s the big problem? Even Konoe has been calling you that recently.”

“Yeah. I never would have imagined that the Subaru-sama would call me ‘Usamin’ one day.” She said, and showed a bashful but happy grin.

That is what surprised me the most after we started living together. Konoe and Masamune’s relationship has come a long way. Put simply, those two sure have gotten close. Both of them can be a bit nervous around others, but now that Masamune learned of Konoe’s secret, they’ve gotten a lot closer.

Well, Konoe calling Masamune by her nickname came from a strong push by Suzutsuki. After all, she said ‘We’ve finally opened up, so you should call Usami-san by her nickname, right?’.

“But, it sure was destructive.”

“...You can say that again.”

After all, she’s our school’s prince Subaru-sama. If she says ‘Urk...U-Usamin? If you’re okay with it, I want to call you Usamin from now on...’ while blushing, it could knock you out in one hit. I mean, I almost collapsed. Being addressed like that, Masamune didn’t take it much better, as you could probably imagine. Ever since then, Konoe has been calling her ‘Usamin’.

“Subaru-sama always seemed like the cool type of person who doesn’t speak much at school, but...she’s actually pretty cute. I understood that while living together with her.”

“But, isn’t that a good thing? Learning more about another person can be pretty fun, right?”

“Yeah...Though, I didn’t think she’d be this bad at cooking...”

“.....”

I feel like her image of Konoe changed a lot. Oh yeah, she liked Konoe in the past, right. It’s all because she figured out Konoe’s secret and learned that she actually isn’t some perfect prince. Though it might be a bit complicated from the person in question. Well, the results are alright in the end, I’d say.

“Oh yeah, where are we even going today?” I asked Masamune, who was walking ahead of me.

Since this was a date, I at least offered to come up with a plan, but Masamune was adamant in saying ‘Leave everything to me!’. Right now, it’s exactly 4pm in the afternoon. It was still a bit too early to have dinner, so maybe we should just spend some time somewhere...

“...Stupid chicken.”

However, Masamune called out my name, sounding a bit anxious.

“There’s a place I’d like to visit before the date, can we?”

“? Yeah, I don’t mind...”

“...Thanks. Then, follow me.” Masamune said, and started walking again, leading the way.

Finally, we reached a residential district near the flat we lived in. Because it was Christmas season, everything was decorated in a Christmas theme, noises from all over. However, the breeze passing through the street wasn’t nearly as cheerful as the mood reigning here. According to the weather report, we’d have some cold waves tonight, and it could even turn into a white Christmas. Well, that would only make things more exciting, I guess. We rarely get any snow on Christmas. But...

“.....”

There must be something, right? A doubt started to grow inside of me. If we’re going on a date, then the plaza at the train station would be best. They have all sorts of locations to check out, and we can use the trains to go a bit further away. However, the residential district is in the opposite direction of the train station. Masamune mentioned a place she wants to visit, but...

“...We’re here.”

After around ten minutes of walking around the residential district, we arrived in front of a perfectly normal house. On the outside, it looked like your average home. Well, it might look normal, but

maybe it has some underground fighting ring for all you know, but since Mom isn't involved, I highly doubt it. It's probably just any normal—

“—!”

There, when I saw **that**, I swallowed my breath. The nameplate on the gate—said Usami.

“.....”

Don't tell me, this is...

“That's right.”

She must have guessed what I was thinking, as Masamune answered my doubts.

“This is my home.”

♀ × ♂

Usami Masamune often mentioned that her circumstances at home were a bit complicated. I mean, I can't say that I was growing up in a perfectly safe and healthy environment with my own family, but she had her own share of troubles, I'm sure. Her parents had her act on a laissez-faire principle. Remembering the words she told me back at the school festival, her parents pretty much left her to her own devices. Or rather, the relationship of her parents was so cold, they simply weren't divorced yet out of concern for how the world perceived them.

In other words, the family was about to break apart. Being raised under these circumstances, Masamune ended up the way she was when I met her—twisted, and unable to trust others. Because even the people she should be able to trust—her own family—was out of the question. However, she slowly managed to get up.

Schrö-senpai told me that she had opened up a lot, and that she has become much more open to others after living together with me and Kureha. Even recently, she's been getting along with Konoe and Suzutsuki. Masamune changed, undoubtedly.

‘—I want to change.’

If memory serves me right, she screamed that atop the rooftop half a year ago. While crying, she screamed that at the top of her lungs. And, she managed to fulfill those words. And yet...why did she go to the home she grew up in?

“...I don’t get it.”

I was sitting in a one-person cafe a bit further away from the residential district, sipping on my cold coffee. It’s been around one hour since I came here.

‘Sorry, stupid chicken, it might take some time, but could you wait for me at the cafe down the street?’

Right as reached her home, this is what she told me. And then, she walked inside, all alone.

“.....”

Maybe she’s talking with her family? No clue about what, but that’s the only reason I could come up with. If this was any normal family, she’d probably spend Christmas with them, enjoying their company. At the very least, that’s how my family did it. Sitting around a hot pot, talking with Mom and Kureha, thinking to myself ‘Well, this isn’t so bad once in a while’. To me, that was Christmas, something natural.

It was just a simple page out of my never-changing daily life. But, thinking back on it now, it was probably an irreplaceable time. I just never really valued it, and accepted it as a fact that every family celebrated it this way. But...what about Masamune? Her family was close to breaking apart, in shambles even. She was left alone to do what she wanted, isolated. Was she happy, spending a Christmas most likely more cold than the freezing air outside?

“Sorry for the wait, stupid chicken.”

When a voice called out to me, my body subconsciously twitched in shock. Looking at my side, there stood Usami Masamune. Like nothing happened, she looked at me with her usual facial expression.

She must have entered from the front door, but I was so lost in my thoughts, I didn't even realize.

"What's that look for? You act like you've seen a ghost."

"No...well, sorry."

"You don't have to apologize either. Rather, I should be the one to. Sorry that I made you wait, it took longer than expected. I finished my business, so let's have some fun. There's a bus stop nearby, so let's move to the train station."

"Y-Yeah."

After we finished the payment, I followed Masamune, as she walked ahead through the streets, beneath the winter sky. Her footsteps seemed so much faster compared to when we walked here. Almost like she wanted to run away, like she wanted to escape from something.

"Masamune."

Before I realized it, I called out to her back. I just had a feeling that I needed to do this.

"Are you...did you talk with your parents? Is that why we came here?"

"....."

She chose silence as her answer. The cold air around stabbed me on my skin. Only a faint breeze could be heard in this otherwise silent night.

"...Yeah, something like that."

After a long silence, Masamune gave me her response. Because she had her back turned towards me, I couldn't properly see her expression.

"It's been quite some time since I started living on my own after all. I figured it was about time to properly bring things to an end."

“Meaning?”

“I—wanted to tell them that I won’t be coming back anymore.”

“.....”

I’m sure that this decision must have been a hard one for Masamune. Parting ways with her family, that is.

“It’s not that big of a deal, really. Our family was already in ruins, and I’m already living on my own, so I just wanted to put it into words.”

“.....”

“After living together with you...with Sakamachi, Subaru-sama, and even Suzutsuki Kanade, I made up my mind. I wanted to move forward. So, I contacted them, saying ‘I have something important to talk about. It’s the last time’. Then... I heard their answer.”

The winter sky had begun to turn dark, as Masamune declared this.

“.....” I couldn’t say anything.

I bet it’s been a while since they had any proper talk. But, that doesn’t mean that it would be anything joyful and happy. Even if it was Christmas, it’s not that everybody could be happy.

“Well, they still gave me the usual laissez-faire answer along the lines of ‘Do what you want’. With that, I can keep living in that flat.”

“...Masamune.” I called out her name.

We might be with her right now, but...

“Don’t worry.”

She must have seen my anxious reaction, as she called out to me.

“I’ve made up my mind. You’ll leave once your home is back to normal, right?”

“...Probably.”

We've been living with her for the simple reason of having no home to return to. However, that reason will soon disappear. According to their plans, the repairs will be complete in the first half of January. That means—

“I doubt Subaru-sama and Suzutsuki Kanade will keep living together with us forever either. Eventually, it'll be me living there alone. But...” Masamune continued. “When Sakamachi ran away from home, you were also close to running after her, right? I panicked quite a bit back then. Worried that I'd end up alone again.”

“.....”

“But, it's fine. I'm prepared for that now. Also, we can still meet at school, right? We can also make plans for the weekend.” Masamune showed a strong smile.

“Sorry, Masamune.”

“Wha...Why are you apologizing, stupid chicken? I'm the one who should do that. It's Christmas Eve, and I pulled down the mood. But...”

“But?”

Silence. Masamune didn't respond immediately.

“I...wanted to come here with you. I don't think I would have been able to do it on my own.”

“.....”

“Anyway, enough of that. It's Christmas, so let's have some fun. We need to cure your gynophobia after all.” She turned towards me, and said with a bright smile, grabbing my hand.

I felt her warmth directly touching me. And like that, we started walking through town while holding hands.

“.....”

But, I wonder why. For some reason, her palm felt colder than usual.

♀ × ♂

This might be a bit random, but I'm somewhat okay-ish when it comes to sports. I mean, this might sound like I'm bragging, but there's a depressing reason for that. Put simply, it's because of my family. After all, both my Mom and little sister clearly surpass the boundaries of normal human beings. While being used as their punching bag, my own physical abilities had improved drastically. I guess it was a necessary evolution in order to survive. What an awful survival of the fittest. That's why, I'm confident that I can at least deal adequately with any kind of sport you may throw at me, even if it was my first time doing it.

“...Alright.”

Feeling the ice skating shoes on my legs, I carefully slid along the ice. That's right, we went to an ice rink. We took the train to move a bit away from the town we lived in, and reached this outdoor ice rink. After hearing about Masamune's family, this is the date location she chose. The radius of this ice rink was around 30m. Because it was Christmas, it was fairly crowded. Also, the percentage of couples was awfully high. That's the holy night for you, I guess.

Thinking about it, going ice skating on Christmas Eve sure sounds romantic. The outside of the rink was illuminated in festive lights, so just skating along was pretty fun. I mean, going around alone as a guy certainly wouldn't be nearly as interesting. However, things are different today. After all, I have Masamune with me—

“...Hold on, you okay?”

I directed my gaze over at the girl, who desperately clung to the wall of the ice rink. She looked at me, and spoke up with a bewildered tone.

“...Weird.”

“Huh? Is the size of your shoes off? Maybe you should get other ones then...”

“Not that! You're the weird one! How can you just skate like that!?”

You said it was your first time, right!” Masamune pouted as she complained.

I mean, even if you ask me that...

“It’s simple. All because of my private training at home.”

“What kind of logic is that...But, your younger sister is good at sports as well, right.”

“Good doesn’t even begin to describe it.”

She’s a genius, and still doesn’t shy away from training. That’s why she excels at whichever sport you might imagine. She’s not just simply good at it. She uses her free time to practice despite being a genius after all. On top of that, she isn’t even conscious of it, and simply does it because it’s normal for her. Basically, she’s on an entirely different level from us.

Well, I don’t like doing sports as much as she does, but after having it hammered into me for almost ten years, I just started to enjoy moving my body. Also, being her older brother, I was sort-of forced to follow her, or I’d be lame.

“Urk...Just you watch, I’ll be able to skate immediately.”

There’s another girl who is passionate about sports for a different reason—Usami Masamune. She gets fired up out of a sense of rivalry. It was the same with her studies, she is the fired-up hard worker. However, even she was never good at ice skating, huh. I don’t really want to bring it up, but it’s hard to watch her like that. The way she keeps clinging to the wall makes her look like a young rabbit fearing for its life, her legs quivering.

“Is this your first time ice skating?”

“Um, I think I tried it out once when I was a child...It’s weird, I should be more used to this.” Masamune let go of the wall, as she tried to remember the sensation from back then.

Then, like she was trying to swim through air, she flailed her arms up and down, trying to gain balance while panicking.

“Kya!?”

In the end, she fell forwards, only barely kept above ground because I supported her.

“Don’t force yourself. We can take it slow.”

“Y-Yeah...Thanks.”

When I supported her with both my arms, Masamune bashfully thanked me...Can’t help it. She’s always taking care of me, so I guess I have to escort her today.

“Don’t worry, once you remember the basics, you’ll be able to skate just fine. Also, you’re putting too much strength in your body. Relax a bit, how about it?”

“Hmpf...why do you have to teach me?”

“I’m fine skating all on my own, but do you really want to get a ‘It’s Christmas, and yet she’s skating around alone?’ gaze from the couples around us?”

“What’s up with that? Wouldn’t it be the same for you, then? I feel like a man going skating alone on Christmas would be even more depressing.”

“I guess so. That’s why, let’s just skate together.”

“.....” After staying quiet for a moment... “Hmpf, sounding so imprudent despite being a stupid chicken.” She said, and grabbed my hand.

It seems like she’s interested in ice skating together.

“.....”

Still, my gynophobia sure has improved over the past year. As proof of that, I could hold her hand without suffering any symptoms. Though if this goes any further, I’ll surely end up with a nosebleed.

“Stupid chicken, even if your symptoms are acting up, hold them

back, okay?”

“I know, I know.”

“Do you really? Coloring the ice rink red with your blood really is bad taste.”

“I’m not Santa Claus, so I’m not fond of turning red.”

“...Woah, that sounded lame. Unlike skating, you suck at sliding along with the conversation.”

“Leave me alone!”

“Also, rather than Santa, you’re more like a reindeer. Rudolf the Red-nosed Reindeer because of your nosebleed.”

“I don’t want to become such a grotesque reindeer!”

If a child saw me like that, 9/10 would cry for sure, and it won’t be any more Merry Christmas. I’d look like a boxer who lived through the 11th round.

“Ah...” Masamune lost her balance again.

In response to that, I subconsciously embraced her body, to which her slender arms wrapped around my back—Warm. It was only through clothes, but I could feel her comfortable warmth, which made my heart skip a beat.

“...Y-You okay?”

“Y-Yeah...” Masamune seemed embarrassed, as her cheeks turned into a pink red.

I can’t blame her. It’s Christmas Eve after all, with only couples around us. The people around us probably feel the same way when looking at us.

“.....”

However, we aren’t lovers. I still have yet to respond to Masamune’s

confession. I thought it would be best because of my gynophobia, and to focus more on my treatment. However...maybe I simply wished for these days to continue a bit longer? For those girls...and also myself...

“Ah.”

“!?”

It happened in an instant. Maybe it's because I was too lost in my thoughts, or maybe Masamune moving away cost me too much, but I lost my own balance, and perfectly fell backwards onto the ice.

“Ouch...” I rubbed my hip.

Ahhh, so lame. What a flashy way of falling over.

“...Hm?”

Then, I felt a cold sensation on my nose. It seems like the weather forecast was perfectly on point today. Once night rolled around, we had snow falling down from the sky. It's a White Christmas. When I looked around me, all the other visitors were looking up at the sky. With the colorful illumination around us, adding the white petals of snow falling down, it was a bewitching sight. Everybody was entranced at this sight, simply looking up at the sky.

“...Ahaha.” There, Masamune showed a cheerful smile. “Look, look, stupid chicken! Snow! White Christmas!”

“...Yeah, I can see it.”

“Come on, can't you be a bit more excited! It's so beautiful, so enjoy it more!” Masamune said, rambling on and on.

That sight of hers entranced me. I completely forgot about standing up.

“.....”

Well, this isn't so bad once in a while. After all, it's the 24th of December, Christmas Eve. Feeling happy won't hurt. So I found

myself thinking arrogantly.

♀ × ♂

After around five minutes, the snow suddenly stopped falling. It was a short White Christmas. Well, it's better than covering the entire town. Maybe God was just trying to be considerate of us?

"Here, I bought you some."

Still at the ice rink, I offered Masamune, who sat on a bench outside the rink, a plastic cup with hot chocolate. She gave me a brief 'Thanks', and took a sip from the hot chocolate. After it stopped snowing, we started skating again. It took Masamune a bit, but she eventually got used to it. Since she's the athletic type, and a member of the handicrafts club, it sure enough didn't take that long. Well, I guess that logic only works at our school. Right now, we're taking a break. It's currently 7pm. We should probably focus on eating dinner soon.

"Oh yeah, Subaru-sama and the others must be out at a party right now, huh."

I sat down next to the girl, when she spoke up.

"Probably. Ichigo-san sure was looking forward to it at least, so it must be a big party."

"Sure enough. Knowing her, she'd probably cut the roasted chicken with a knife."

"Are you saying that she's venting out her anger towards me?"

I mean, it does sound plausible. She'd probably take the chicken apart herself. I'm getting shivers just thinking about it.

"What were you doing last year on Christmas, stupid chicken?"

"Hot pot."

"Hot pot...that's pretty old-fashioned."

“Can’t help it. It’s our tradition to sit around the kotatsu and have hot pot.”

“Hmm, sounds fun.”

“Well, it sure wasn’t boring.”

“Ahh, I guess Sakamachi would create chaos again.”

“You really know her well, huh.”

Thinking about it, our hot pot sure was something else. The criminal was always Kureha. After all, she’d say ‘Let’s put something red in it!’, and tossed kimchi and tomatoes in there. At the very least, all of it was edible.

“Fufu, sounds fun...Achoo!”

“Wah, you okay?”

“I-I’m fine, was just a sneeze.” Masamune said, and took another sip of her hot chocolate.

“Don’t catch another cold, you hear me?”

“Hmpf, I know that.”

“Do you really? I don’t want to be used as a hot-water bottle here.”

“S-S-S-Shut up! I was hugging you back then because I had a fever! If not, I would never do something so embarrassing!”

“Really now.”

“~~~! W-What’s your problem...it warmed me up, so it’s fine...”
Masamune pouted.

Her sulking gesture made her look cute like a girl.

“Just be careful. You were excited all day, so you’ll just get a cold much easier if you’re exhausted.”

“Urk...was I really that excited?”

“You were screaming ‘White Christmas!’ a few minutes ago.”

Normally, she definitely wouldn’t be this excited about something. At the very least, not as long as it’s about rabbits.

“W-What’s the problem? It’s Christmas after all.” Masamune blabbered on.

And then, she awkwardly averted her gaze from me.

“...Hey, Masamune.” I came up with a question to ask. “Did something happen at your home before we came here?”

“Eh...”

She went silent. Masamune was awfully energetic today. Or rather, almost too energetic knowing how she usually acted. It’s like she was trying to hide something, trying to force out a smile. The reason for that was surely because something happened back at her home. After she met her parents—

“...Stupid chicken.” Masamune called out my name, sounding worried. “I know that this isn’t the day for that, but would you mind listening to some idle grumbling?”

“Course. If you’re okay with me.”

“...Thanks.” She gave me a faint thanks.

Compared to before, her smile was devoid of any energy.

“Just like I explained, I visited my family to bring an end to everything. Of course, I don’t plan on suddenly getting along with them, nor do I think that it’s actually possible.”

“.....” I stayed silent, simply listening to her.

Making up probably is impossible for her family. However, I won’t tell her anything. I barely know any details about her and her family, so I’m not in the position to say anything. It’s a problem related to them. No matter how messed up and fractured it may be, it still is Masamune’s family. So, they should resolve that themselves.

“That’s why I went there today, thinking that might be the last time...Or at the very least, I called them over with these intentions.”

Last time...Meaning, she’ll cut her ties with her family. That’s why she went and visited them.

“But.”

However, her next words shocked me.

“...**They weren’t there.**”

“...What?” I let out a dumbfounded voice.

They weren’t there? The heck is up with that? Didn’t she just say that she heard their response?

“At first, I thought I got the time wrong. But, when I checked the mail I sent them, it fit. That’s why I decided to wait a bit.”

“.....”

“No matter...how long I waited, they never came. I planned to meet them one last time, and thought of saying my goodbyes, and yet...”

“.....”

“So, while waiting for them, I started thinking...and it clicked. That this was their answer.”

“.....!”

I swallowed my breath.

Basically, this was her parents’ attitude towards Masamune herself, and their final comment. Masamune went to meet them with determination, and yet they didn’t meet her. They ignored their own damn child, which also acted as their response. They left Masamune to her own accords again. But...

“...That’s messed up...!” Before I realized it, I uttered these words with a quivering voice.

I mean, you're supposed to be family. Even if you leave your child alone to their own accord, they still are your child. You have to still care about them...!

"...Thank you, stupid chicken."

For some reason, Masamune told me these words.

"Why are you thanking me?"

"I mean, you're angry right now, aren't you."

"...I guess."

"That's why I wanted to thank you. Getting angry for my sake...But, you don't have to worry about it. It's my personal problem after all."

"....."

"Not to mention...talking to you made me feel a lot better. I couldn't give them my final regards, but if we really could do that as a family, something like this might not have happened." Masamune spoke with a cynical tone.

I couldn't help but agree. If they even managed to have a proper conversation, then their family would not have fallen apart like that. However, reality is cruel. Masamune's family was already a mess, so recovery was impossible.

"Masamune." I calmly called her name. "Are you...really fine with that?" I asked her.

Honestly speaking, I don't even know what I can do, but if she needs my help, then I want to provide it. I still think that families should resolve these problems between themselves. However, if she really wants to meet her parents, I'd be ready to forcefully drag them over no problem. As long as she wishes for it...

"...It's fine." Masamune said, sounding confident. "It's true that I want to meet them, but I can also say my final farewell with a mail. They might not respond, or not even read it, but I'll be satisfied. After all—I'm happy right now." She said. "I'm not a loner like before. I

have friends like you, Subaru-sama, Suzutsuki Kanade, and even more. It's a bit noisy at times, but definitely not in a bad way."

"....."

"Not to mention that I got to go on a date with you. In fact, I always admired this way of enjoying Christmas. It's like one of my wishes has been granted." She blushed ever so slightly, and declared this with a bashful tone.

Her expression looked like she was smiling.

"....."

I wonder why, but seeing her smile like that, it felt like all the anger had vanished.

"I didn't do anything that would deserve any gratitude." I exclaimed. "The reason you get to be happy right now, and spend Christmas with someone else—is because you worked hard. You changed yourself."

That's right, Masamune changed. She's not alone as she was. It's all because of her hard work. Even though she was unable to put faith in others, she worked hard to change that. According to what Schrösenpai said, she opened up a lot at the club, showing up more frequently, forming new bonds with the club members, as well as Suzutsuki and Konoe. It's all thanks to her, and she earned it.

"—No, it wasn't just my strength alone." Masamune let out a white breath, and said so.

And then, she looked directly at me.

"The reason I managed to change is because you saved me."

"....."

"Back at the school festival, if you hadn't saved me, I never would have managed to change, I'm sure. That's why—I won't ever forget that." She used only her utmost honest words.

The past Masamune surely never would have managed to say that with a smile on her face.

“Alright, let’s end this break, shall we? I need to get more skating in since it’s been a while.” Masamune said, and stood up from the bench.

And then, she slowly walked towards the rink again.

“.....”

Maybe...she chose this location because she came here in the past? After all, she told me when I asked her. This is just my assumption, but she probably went ice skating with her family before. I don’t know how her family treated her back then. Maybe they were acting a lot more kind? Right now, her family is in shambles.

“.....”

Maybe she came here to put a clear cut to her feelings? All so that she could move forward. So that she could stand on her own two feet.

“Come on, stupid chicken! I’ll leave you behind if you don’t hurry up!” She waved her hand at me, who was still sitting on the bench, and showed a gleeful smile.



“Yeah yeah,” I responded.

Family—We are indeed like a family. After having been living together for two months, even going on a Christmas date. But, I don’t know how long this will last. Once January rolls around, my home will be back to normal, and once my treatment for my gynophobia ends, I need to give her my answer—in regards to her confession.

“.....”

But at the very least, until that day comes, I want to enjoy this daily life as long as I can. I can't forget that however. So for that, I stood up, and followed Masamune with a smile.

Chapter 4: New Year's Day Festival

January 1st. If there was a ranking which words would be the most prominently used on that day, it would surely be 'Happy New Year!' as your top spot, followed by 'Give me New Year's money!' as a close second. Naturally, the one event to consider on this day is the first shrine visit of the year. At the very least, when it comes to a normal family.

In our family, we had the tradition of doing a 'Human Mochi Pounding Contest!'. Basically a type of training, with Kureha and Mom doing a power bomb on the training mat, using my head as the mochi. However, this year Mom isn't home. The other criminal, Kureha, is out at the Narumi house. She must have enjoyed it there, so she'll probably stay there until the rebuilding of our home is done. As long as she doesn't bother them.

Either way, because the feminine commander isn't home, I managed to greet a safe and secure New Year's. She's probably eating mochi under the kotatsu. And now, New Year's Day has arrived.

"...Cold."

It was currently 10.23 am. Christmas had passed us by, and while shivering in the cold breeze, I gazed at the white breath coming out of my mouth. Of course, I wasn't all alone in my sentiments, after all—I was at a public shrine. Ironically enough, it's the same shrine where Schrö-senpai gave me a full-blown smack to the face. I was waiting for a certain individual at the lower part of the stairs—Namely, Suzutsuki Kanade.

Similar to Christmas, she and Konoe should be home over New Year's with their families, and yet she suddenly called me over. Not to mention that it'll apparently be only the two of us today. Masamune was busy making dinner since this morning, and Konoe was busy with her own work at the residence, so she couldn't join us.

“...Hm?”

There, my smartphone in my pocket suddenly started vibrating. I heard the familiar ‘The Godfather’ theme, belonging to none other than Suzutsuki Kanade. Speak of the devil, but literally.

“Hello?”

When I pressed the answer button with frozen fingers, I immediately heard an eerie ‘Hehe’ from the other end.

‘Happy new year, Jirou-kun.’

“Yeah, happy new year.”

‘So cold. This is our first talk this year, you know?’

“What’s it matter? We don’t need to be considerate of each other, right?”

After all, we’ve been living together for an entire month. Even if you’re close, there’s still a glimmer of respect you should probably offer the other person, but she’s never showing any signs like that, so I don’t care. I’m not playing along with some sadist.

“So, why are you calling me? Gonna be late?”

‘It’s fine, I already decided that I wouldn’t participate in the event at home.’

“...Event?”

‘The Suzutsuki Family New Year Hidden Talent Contest’.

“The heck, that sounds interesting!”

‘We also have pokori.’

“You better hide that!”

‘Our top rank last year was Ichigo.’

“Wah, I can only imagine...”

‘Her special talent was sawing people in half magic.’

“Sounds pretty terrifying to me, alright!”

Rather than magic, it sounds like some kind of experiment from some cult. Ichigo-san seems the perfect match for the role of the villainess. She even has her eye bandage.

“Is that why Konoe is busy?”

‘Yes. I want her to work hard. If she doesn’t get some good laughs, I’m expecting a punishment.’

“You really don’t hold back.”

‘I’ll have her change her name from Konoe Subaru to Konoe Suberu.’

“No restraint at all!”

I don’t even want to imagine her name turning to ‘Suberu-sama’ after the winter break is over.

‘Well, I doubt Nagare would accept that.’

“Hm? Is the old fart back?”

Konoe Nagare—Konoe Subaru’s father, and another butler of the Suzutsuki Family. If memory serves right, he wasn’t home when I was working as their servant, as he was following his own master, namely Suzutsuki’s father.

‘Indeed. I met him over Christmas, but he still can’t stand even the thought of you.’

“That’s not even a shock anymore this late into the game.”

‘...Hey, Jirou-kun, can I ask you something?’ Suzutsuki suddenly spoke up with a serious tone. ‘Why does Nagare hate you that much?’

“If I knew that, I wouldn’t have this much trouble, alright!”

‘Hehe, you might be right. But, he clearly hates you far too much. After all...he ignored my orders.’

“Huh? Ignored your orders...He did something so unlike him?”

‘Yes, do you remember? Back in April in the leisure land, he beat you to a pulp, right?’

“...I sure do, yeah.”

Or rather, how could I forget? Honestly speaking, it was a fresh experience to get beaten up by someone outside my family. Even tasting the regret after losing. After all, it happened in a single strike. I only got to hit him once myself. And who knows, maybe that attack didn’t even have any effect on him. That was the first time I ever learned of my own weakness. That’s why, after that incident, I’ve been training myself even without Mom around. Then again, I still kept losing against Konoe and Kureha.

‘I’m sorry, I know that it was to get rid of Subaru’s trauma, but we did something horrible to you. However...there’s also the part of Nagare ignoring my orders. I ordered him to hold back against the friend of Subaru who will arrive eventually.’

“Wha...”

The heck is up with that? The old man was dead serious. I’m not an amateur when it comes to fighting. I can at least fight back when attacked. And, Konoe Subaru was undoubtedly serious. He was trying to defeat me no matter what it took.

‘Honestly speaking, I’ve had my doubts for quite some time. On the final day of summer break, I remember thinking about it. But, I couldn’t make any sense of it.’

“...Maybe he’s just that much of a helicopter parent?”

He couldn’t allow any man to get close to his beloved daughter? It sounds mighty plausible, knowing the man. Or maybe he couldn’t stand how I got up again and again.

‘Well, most likely.’

From across the call, I felt like I heard Suzutsuki nod along. And then, her voice sounded a lot more cheerful compared to before.

‘By the way, Jirou-kun, I’m already at the shrine.’

“Eh, really?”

‘Yes. That’s why, come up the stairs, I’ll be waiting there.’ She said, and hung up the call.

That damn Suzutsuki. She could have told me sooner if she’s here already. I’ve been freezing my butt off out here. With these thoughts in my head, I walked up the stairs. As expected, a lot of people were also doing their first shrine visit of the year. It’s going to be a lot of work to try and find Suzutsuki in this mess. Though, her looks might help me out a bit.

“Would you like some sweet sake?” Suddenly, a voice called out to me.

Standing there was a single shrine maiden. Hmmm...I rarely get to see these clothes in real life, what a treat. The contrast between red and white is a blessing for the eyes. I guess Eastern-themed clothes really look good on Japanese people. When I got a better look at the girl—I realized that it was Suzutsuki Kanade, wearing a shrine maiden’s uniform.

“.....” First thing in the new year, and I was already at a loss for words.

Weird, am I still dreaming or something? What a weird dream to have first thing in the new year. I would rather have preferred something more tame. Why did it have to be this rich lady? Ahhh, my bad luck of the new year is showing. Couldn’t I have had anything better than this?

“Jirou-kun, can you stop trying to run away from reality one minute after meeting me?” Suzutsuki easily guessed my thoughts, as she showed me a grin.

Wah, what is this. She’s way too cute. Her long black hair fit her shrine maiden clothes even better. I’d definitely come visit the shrine on a daily basis if they had a shrine maiden like her. They should make a campaign with her as the cover girl.



“...What are you doing?”

“Come on, you can’t tell?” Suzutsuki twirled on the spot, showing off her clothes.

Did she go to the New Year’s festival yesterday? No, she’s not the type to cosplay like that. So basically...

“...Working part-time?”

“Correct. Narumi-senpai actually introduced me to this job.”

“Why Schrö-senpai!?”

“You didn’t know? She’s not here this year, but she usually works here as a shrine maiden every year. While screaming ‘This year, I’ll be part of the 12 zodiacs!’.”

“Whatever she’s saying doesn’t make any sense...”

“Well, she supposedly likes these sorts of events. The people of the shrine are thankful as well.”

“...Were they now?”

“Ever since she started working here part-time, the number of visitors has gone up 40% or something like that.”

“How does that even work!?”

“Some of the maniacs started calling her ‘Shrine Maidinger-san’, and started praying to her.”

“Wrong target!”

“The single ‘I’ll turn you into MikkoMikko!’ broke records last year...”

“The shrine is totally up for this, huh!?”

Why are they releasing CDs? They clearly started a business here. What is this, are they starting a new cult? Well, I can see that a small and energetic Schrö-senpai wearing shrine maiden clothing might look cute. Also, does she actually enjoy cosplaying by any chance? She went out looking like Santa Claus before.

“Well, she’s busy with her entrance exams this year, so she couldn’t work.”

“Oh yeah, she plans to study overseas, right.”

I feel like she mentioned something like that before during the sports festival. Something about ‘wanting to see more of the world’, a motive that’s very much like her, I guess.

“That being the case, I filled the hole. What do you think? Does it look good?” The rich lady flashed an angelic smile.

“.....”

Crap, is this the birth of ‘Shrine Maidentsuki-san’? She should just join Schrö-senpai to form the group ‘TWO MIKOS’.

“Fufu, you probably gave me some weird name like ‘Shrine Maidentsuki-san’, right? Sadly, that’s not it.” Suzutsuki guessed my thoughts, and showed a grin, pointing at me. “I am—Godtsuki-san.”

“You ranked up to become a God now!?”

“Not exactly, but I am a shrine maiden right now, basically working in the divine realm. As I am supporting the gods, it wouldn’t be weird to receive that name, right?” Godtsuki-san puffed out her chest.

O-Oh my lord, to think I would see the birth of Godtsuki-san. I thought she was the devil when I first met her, but she now named herself to be a goddess.

“Of course, my special technique is biting.”

“So lame!”

“Nom!”

“Don’t bite me! Especially not my neck!”

“By the way, one bite will be an offering of 50,000 yen.”

“What an awful Goddess you are!”

I guess there’s evil deities out there. I don’t see any good coming from following that goddess.

“Well, leaving all the jokes aside, since you’re here, let’s get our first

shrine visit of the year done.”

“I don’t mind, but what about your part-time job?”

“I just entered my break. I’ve been working since this morning.”
Suzutsuki said, taking my hand in an all-too natural fashion.

Because she had worked until now, her palm felt warm, and comforting.

“Jirou-kun, your body has cooled down quite a bit, huh.”

“It’s because you made me wait so long.”

“Hehe, I’m sorry. I wanted to surprise you.”

“Well, you sure succeeded in that.”

Did she really have to work part-time simply to surprise me for that? Why can’t she direct that passion elsewhere? I hope she at least aims to become a comedian in the future.

“But, I wasn’t simply working here to surprise you, Jirou-kun. It’s also to cure your gynophobia.”

“Huh? What are you talking about?” I asked, while setting foot onto the stone path.

Following that, Suzutsuki showed me a dazzling smile.

“I figured that, in order to cure your gynophobia, our best choice would be to pray to the gods.”

“.....”

Hold on a damn second. Asking the gods for help? Really?

“Do you have a better idea? Subaru, Usami-san, and I have been living together with you, but your gynophobia doesn’t improve at all.”

“Urk...My bad.”

Being stabbed where it hurt, I could only apologize. But...just a bit more. I feel like it's getting close to disappearing. However, so was the time we had left. Winter break is going to end soon, so I'd prefer to have it gone before that, but...

"Don't worry." A dignified voice interrupted my thoughts, as Suzutsuki took my hand, strongly. "We can cure it."

"Suzutsuki..." I went silent, simply staring at her face.

I see...so she's fully intent on helping me...

"After all—I'll be going all out today."

"....."

Okay, stop. I heard something awfully ominous just now, but why is that?

"Um, Suzutsuki? What do you mean by that, may I ask?"

"Isn't that obvious? I will make you go crazy for me today!"

"That makes even less sense!"

Also, she wasn't serious before!? Waaaaaaah, now I'm terrified! I mean, I feel like she's been going all out lately. Deretsuki-san at full power, may I add. She was making an appeal to the point even I felt embarrassed.

"With Subaru and Usami-san around, I just feel embarrassed, so I can't be serious."

"D-Don't tell me, is this why we came here alone today?"

"Exactly. That's why—" She hugged me like a koala clinging to its tree.

And then, she whispered into my ear with a voice sweet enough to melt my brain.

"You better prepare yourself today, okay?"

“.....”

Yeah, my luck with women is the first it's ever been. I don't even need to pull my fortune for this year. Damn, how many more years am I going to continue this tradition? I thought I had enough trouble with the women in my family, but I guess that was just the beginning.

“.....”

Still, even if she says she'll be going all out, there's no way she can do something so bold as the noble lady she is...

“Ah, by the way, I'm not wearing any underwear beneath my uniform.”

“!?”

“This is my New Year's gift for you.”

“.....”

“How is it, Jirou-kun? When I cling to you like this, you should be able to feel the sensation of my breasts almost directly, right?” She pressed my arm right between her own arm and breasts.

...No joke. Deretsuki...No, Godtsuki-san is no joke. Eh? But, wait? She's not wearing underwear...That has to be a lie, right? I mean, it would be one hell of a New Year's gift, pressing her soft, marshmallow-like breasts directly onto me, but...She wouldn't do that, right?

“Don't worry, I was just making that up.”

“Yeah...I figured. There's no way you would...”

“I'm at least wearing panties.”

“So you're not wearing a bra!?”

“What's the problem, I'm a shrine maiden right now.”

“Your consciousness of being a shrine maiden is absolutely messed up!”

You’re going to melt my brain away at this rate. I can hear the temple bell ringing not just 108 times in my head.

“Now, let’s offer our prayers, should we?”

Since we reached the offerings box, Suzutsuki finally let go of me. This is bad for my heart, seriously. Even without my gynophobia, I don’t think I would be able to take this for too long. My heart is going into overtime mode. I’m worried I might get a heart attack.

“Hey, what did you wish for?”

After we finished giving our prayers and made our wishes, Suzutsuki suddenly asked me that.

“Well, something along the lines of ‘I hope I get rid of my gynophobia soon’.”

“Meta.”

“Shut up. That’s my main goal right now. What about you then?”

“Eh? Me...?” There, Suzutsuki blushed. “I wished that you and I could be together forever.”

“.....”

No no, you don’t need to make up nonsense like that—is what I was about to say, but seeing her serious expression, I couldn’t say that. She’s serious. There’s no way she was joking. I haven’t been living together with her for a month for nothing. I can tell how she truly feels with just her expression alone. Though my rate of success isn’t that great.

“But, that’s not all.” Suzutsuki suddenly said. “I also want to be together with Subaru, Usami-san, Kureha-chan, and everybody else working at my residence.”

“Sure sounds noisy.”

“What’s it matter? At least it won’t be boring. I want this kind of daily life to continue.”

“.....”

Daily life, huh...Just as Suzutsuki said, life right now is fun. It’s so fun...it’s almost scary. I’m scared of these days ending one day. Of when I have to bring an end to it.

“Jirou-kun, how about we pull our fortunes?”

As I was lost in my thoughts, Suzutsuki suddenly pulled me along, taking me to a small stall near the shrine. Hmm, fortune slips, huh? That reminds me, I got somewhat bad luck last year. In April, I was almost beat to death by the old man; in May I was run over by a truck, and hospitalized; in June I was hit by Masamune’s motorbike; in July...yeah, you know what, let’s just stop it there. It wasn’t just somewhat bad luck. Not even Jack S*arrow would run into this much trouble while travelling the sea.

“Okay, please pull out one of the sticks with the numbers on it.” Suzutsuki got back into her shrine maiden mood, and offered me the box.

It seems like their principle was to take the number pulled, and bring the fortune from the back of the stall. I took out a stick, and—

“Hehe, number 13, I see.” Suzutsuki personally brought me my fortune slip.

Alright, I’m begging you, gods up above. Give me some good luck this year. You need to make up for all the hellish stuff that happened last year. With these thoughts, I looked at my fortune slip, and...

—[Daikyu¹].

“.....”

Phew man, this is actually amazing. First time I got terrible luck in my life. Maybe I really am cursed? Maybe I should go for an exorcism since I’m here already?

“Get a better look at it, there’s something even more interesting.”

“More interesting?” I asked, and read through the words on the fortune slip.

So, for studying it says...’Redo from grade school’...huh.

“.....”

Um, excuse me, I’ve never seen such advice on a fortune slip before. What about health...

‘You will have your left shoulder dislocated by your younger sister’s wrestling move.’

“That’s a tad bit too specific, right!?”

“You’re right, this fortune slip sure is close to the mark.”

“Now I’m scared to ever leave my room again!”

It’s terrifying especially because I could totally see it happening. You know my little sister, I might just suffer that injury tomorrow. Also, this fortune slip, could it possibly be...I felt uncertain about something, but continued to read my love section next.

‘Since a girl confessed to you, you ought to give her a proper response. Do your best, Jirou-kun – by Suzutsuki Kanade.’

“Suzutsukiiiiiiiiii!?”

“My, what’s wrong? Why are you screaming like that?”

“Don’t give me that ‘What’s wrong?’, oi! You wrote this, huh!?”

“Where is the proof?”

“In the ‘by Suzutsuki Kanade’ right at the end!”

“Oh my, how careless of me.”

“You weren’t even trying to hide it, right!”

Forging a fake fortune slip like that, to think she'd set me up like that...First day of the year, and I already get pranked...

"I'm sorry, your real fortune slip is over here." Suzutsuki showed a gleeful smile, and offered me my fortune slip.

Seems like she had that one prepared beforehand, huh. Maybe she's more fit to be a magician than a shrine maiden. Her skills rival David Copperfield.

"What does it say?"

"Let me see...Um...Ohh! Daikichi²!"

"Daichicken? Even if you are a chicken bastard, I doubt it'll actually say that."

"Don't create weird words out of sheer boredom!"

What the hell is daichicken even supposed to be? Like hell I'd let there be such a messed up fortune.

"Your retorts are as sharp as always." Suzutsuki let out a snicker.

She looked like she was having fun.

"....."

Well, maybe my fortune slip wasn't that far off the mark. I got to see her smile after all. Hearing her honest feelings, and seeing her genuine smile, I—

"...? What's wrong, why is your face red?"

"I-It's nothing!" I tried to hide my embarrassment, and looked away from her.

...Damn it, not fair. Her smile really is too cute. Even more so if it came from the bottom of her heart.

"Now then, we finished pulling your fortune slip, so let me show you around the shrine premises." Suzutsuki took my hand, and started

walking ahead.

While holding hands, I felt her warmth, and we walked ahead again.

“.....”

In my head, the words on the fortune slip replayed.

‘You ought to give her a proper response.’

...Yeah, I know. Of course I do. She needs the answer to her confession. Once the whole gynophobia ordeal is over, I can give all of them my answer.

“.....”

But, is that really fine? A doubt popped up in my head. Just as Suzutsuki said, the days we are spending together right now are exceptionally fun. It’s a bit chaotic and noisy, but I like spending these days together. However...

“.....”

What will happen to this daily life if I gave her my response? Maybe it’ll break apart after all. Like it never had existed in the first place, like there was never anything to begin with, but simple void—breaking apart like a castle of sand...

“Jirou-kun.” Suzutsuki called out to me with a gentle voice. “Don’t think about it too much.”

“.....”

“You just be honest with us. Don’t hesitate, and live while following your own feelings. That’s what I wish for you, after all—I like you for who you are.”

“...Suzutsuki.”

Before I realized it, she had stopped in her tracks. We reached the backside of the shrine premises. Even though the front was filled with people everywhere, not a single soul could be spotted back here.

Well, there was no need to come back here, so that does make sense.

“Oh yeah, Jirou-kun...have you realized?” Suzutsuki started speaking.

“About what?”

“Usami-san, of course. She’s changed.”

“Yeah, she did open up a lot...”

“No, not just that. After all—she can’t figure out if I’m lying again or not.”

“.....” I swallowed my breath.

“I realized it with the Suzutsuki Revolution incident. Back then, she believed that Subaru and I were lovers. Even though I lied, she still put her faith into it. The reason she became like that—is you.”

“Me?”

“Yes. You and Kureha-chan have been living together with her for a month right after moving out of my residence. Thanks to that, she opened up a lot more towards other people. She was much more cold and distant before.”

“.....”

Just as Suzutsuki said, Masamune opened up a lot towards us. Of course, it’s not just us. The same goes for Konoe and Suzutsuki, and the other club members. And now, she can’t even see through Suzutsuki’s nonsense anymore, which means...

“The reason she managed to see through my nonsense is because she was always on guard when it came to other people. However, she’s different now. She became able to trust others.”

“Yeah, it’s true that she was always wary around you.”

The Masamune of the past always had trouble believing others. That’s why this rich lady’s nonsense never worked on her. Because she’s

always been careful around her, assuming that she was lying. Now, things are different. Masamune changed, and became friends with Suzutsuki and Konoe.

“However, being too gullible is also a problem. Not everybody is a saint out there, so trusting people without any condition is dangerous.”

“.....”

“That being said, if you don’t open up your heart to anybody at all... It’ll just be exhausting. It sounds so simple, but you can’t live on without ever trusting anybody. It’ll tear you apart.”

“.....”

It sounded like she told these words herself rather than spoke about somebody else. After all, Suzutsuki Kanade and Usami Masamune are similar. Just like Masamune blocked off people so that they wouldn’t approach her, Suzutsuki put on a mask so that the people around her wouldn’t see who she truly was. However.

“Should be fine then.” I said, like it was the logical conclusion.
“Masmaune is fine now. At the very least, she is putting faith in us now, and we do the same to her. On top of that...you’re our friend now as well.”

“.....” Suzutsuki remained silent, simply listening to my words.

“Just as you said, it’s not a good thing to easily trust others. But, everybody needs someone like that. We’re all saying that, all are like that, not just you or Masamune.”

Living all alone isn’t fun. That kind of life is boring, uninteresting, not worth living. That’s why we search for people we can trust, become friends. It’s a simple conclusion. Suzutsuki must have realized this herself. After all, Masamune isn’t the only one who has changed, she has as well. Suzutsuki Kanade did as well. She chose to muster up her courage, which is why she’s here with me right now.

“You’re right. I’m happy to have you as a friend, as someone I can trust.”

“Huh, I didn’t expect you to be this honest.”

“Fufu, I told you before, I’ll go all out today. That means I’ll say whatever I want to.”

“Really now.”

“That being the case, Jirou-kun.” Suzutsuki let go of my hand. “It’s cold, so warm me up.” She suddenly clung to my body, head-on.

“...You really don’t hold back at all.”

“It should be fine for at least today. Not to mention that this is all part of your treatment. Also, I can warm myself up like this, so I’m happy.” She said, and wrapped her arms around my body.

This allowed me to feel her warmth, as well as the beating of her heart. I’m sure that these must be her honest feelings.

“Hey, Jirou-kun.” While hugging me, she spoke up. “Once winter break is over, and your gynophobia is fixed...Would you let me hear the answer to my confession?”

“...Yeah, of course.” I nodded without hesitation.

This winter break might just be the final few days we can spend together in peace. Konoe, Suzutsuki, Masamune, and I. With the responses to the confessions, everything might come breaking down. There’s no guarantee that everything will work out. That’s how reality works. But even so...

“.....”

They want their answers, I’m sure. After all, keeping things vague never helped anybody. That’s why they spend the past month all together. I don’t think that curing my gynophobia was the only reason they wanted to live together. It was to continue these days just a bit longer. The final day might arrive soon enough—

“...But.” Suzutsuki spoke up, sounding worried. “Maybe—it might not be such a clean ending.”

“What do you mean?”

“This is just my thought process, but you got rejected by Subaru before, right? I thought she did it simply out of consideration for my—her master’s—feelings. And, I’m sure that’s one part of it...but not all.”

“Is there...any other reason besides caring for you?”

“Yes. Most likely, she’s having trouble with a problem even I can’t figure out. Who knows, maybe she still is troubled by that at this very moment. After all...” Suzutsuki said, only to go silent. “...No, nevermind. Telling you that probably wouldn’t be fair at all.”

“...Really now. Well, you don’t need to tell me.”

“Fufu, I don’t want to corner you. After all, I might just plot something in the background, right.”

“That’s fine, after all...I believe you.” I said what I felt.

“...You really are too good for your own good, Jirou-kun.”

“Probably.”

“Then, you won’t get angry if I hug you a bit more?”

“Yeah, of course not.”

“...Fufu, thank you.” She said, and buried her face in my chest.

While feeling her warmth, I started thinking. Today is January 1st. Winter break will end, and the new term starts on January 5th. Naturally, time never stops, so we’ll soon reach that day. And...

“.....”

Winter—the season that I spend with them—will end.

1 Terrible/very bad luck

2 Excellent luck

Chapter 5: Stargazing

January 4th, also the final day of winter break. Surely, it is the turning point for us. After all, the third term will begin shortly.

“This should do it.”

I was preparing everything for the classes that would happen tomorrow. It's currently 10pm in the evening. My room was filled with several cardboard boxes that contained my private belongings. This might just be my final night in this room. After the incident that caused my home to burn down back in September, the repairs are finally complete. Today, I was contacted and informed of that. That's why I practically lost my reason to live here. On top of that...

“It's gotten a lot better.”

Naturally, I was talking about my gynophobia. Through living here in this flat with Konoe, Suzutsuki, and Masamune, this awful disposition of mine has improved drastically. It's pretty much completely gone at this point. Through this past month, I've been thinking a lot. As a result of that...

“...Jirou, can I come in?”

A knock resounded on my door, together with a translucent voice. It's Konoe Subaru, visiting my room.

“Yeah, come in.” I gave a frank response, to which Konoe walked inside.

She was wearing her usual butler clothing. I think she could wear more comfortable clothes, but that's her style of doing things. It is very much like here, you could say. She holds very strong conviction towards being a butler. It's because she and Suzutsuki are friends, and she also is doing this for her mother. As that is her one connection for her late mother.

“...You've finished preparing, I see.” Konoe looked around my room,

and muttered this with a somewhat dejected tone.

“Yeah, my place is back to normal now after all.”

“So you’ll go back.”

“Yeah. Can’t wait to get beaten up by Kureha on a daily basis.”

“But, Kureha-chan is still at Nakuru-chan’s place, right?”

“Yeah, about that...”

She’s still running away from home, staying at the Narumi Family’s place. Masamune apparently told her to come back, but she hasn’t. Maybe Kureha’s still thinking about something in her own way.

“Yeah, I’ll tell her once we meet at school tomorrow.”

“Really? But, spending this month together was fun alright. With Jirou, my lady, and Usamin...No, Usami.”

“Konoe, you can keep calling her Usamin in front of me, you know?”

“~~~!?” Konoe blushed furiously.

She probably is still embarrassed. In front of us, she calls Masamune ‘Usami’. However, when it’s just the two of them, she goes with ‘Usamin’. They sure have gotten close.

“I-I-I’m not embarrassed or anything!”

“Then why do you constantly switch between those two?”

“T-That’s...!”

“Why not have her call you ‘Subaru’ as well? Makes you seem more like friends.”

“~~~!? I may be happier about that, but...”

“But?”

“It’d just make me feel bashful...” Subaru-sama blushed furiously.

She sure can be clumsy despite being a butler. Maybe that's how they managed to become friends? They're both somewhat similar, which brings them closer. In this past month, a lot has changed. It's gotten more noisy, much more of a ruckus, and fun. Amidst these days, our relationships—as well as ourselves have changed. However, it's over now. Once tomorrow comes—

“...Jirou.” Konoe Subaru called out to me.

Her translucent eyes looked up at me.

“.....”

Yeah, she clearly had a reason for coming here to my room. That probably is...



“Won’t you go on a date with me?” She grabbed the hem of her uniform, and said so to the best of her ability.

I showed a faint smile, and gave a brief “Gotcha”. If she hadn’t asked me, I surely would have called out to her myself. After all, today is the final day of winter break, so we don’t have much time anymore.

“But, where should we go?”

She said date, but just walking around town isn't a date. I mean, it'd be fun to just walk around with her, but...

"Don't worry, I already prepared everything." She said, and grabbed my hand, as I sat on the chair.

And then, she told me about the place we'd visit on this final day of winter break.

"Let's gaze at the stars together."

♀ × ♂

Stargazing—that was Konoe's plan for the date. However, our town was too lit-up even at night, which made it hard to see the stars even this late. That's why we had to move to a more remote location. The problem however was that very act.

"How's it feel, Odd Jobs-san?"

"Not bad, but..."

"Why don't you show a more joyful expression then? It's like I've kidnapped you."

"....."

I mean, the reason I'm nervous is because you're the driver! But of course, I couldn't say that to Saotome Ichigo, the maid of the Suzutsuki Family. Next to me sat Konoe, in the back of the family limousine. This is the second time I get to enjoy this ride after getting my hand injured. The reason for my anxiety is the driver being Ichigo-san, and also because this limousine seems so damn expensive. The way she drives so recklessly is making me anxious. Well, it's better than having the chainsaw aimed at my neck.

"By the way, about our trade."

"Yeah, I know."

The butler and maid shared a few words. Konoe seemed to be used to driving with Ichigo-san, as she was indifferent to it all.

“YES. Now Kanade-ojousama belongs to me only...~”

“.....”

For some reason, I heard Ichigo-san mutter an awfully eerie phrase under her breath. On top of that, the car accelerated as well. The song ‘Driver’s High’ from a certain rock band started playing in my head.

“Ichigo, I understand that you’re happy, but please keep it safe.”

“I know that. But, thinking about what will happen from now on... Heh...hehehehe.”

“.....”

Let me off! Let me ooooooooooooooooooff! That’s what I was screaming in my head. The BGM in my head turned from ‘Driver’s High’ to ‘Heaven’s Drive’. I don’t think I’ll be able to come back alive from this. Before I’ll get to see the stars, we will turn into stars instead.

“K-Konoe? What trade?”

If this was some kind of documentary happening, it’d be something like ‘From inside the car coffin’. While thinking about useless stuff like that, I asked Konoe with a quivering voice.

“It’s not that big of a deal. I just promised to give her a reward if she were to drive us.”

“Reward?”

“Private pictures of the lady.”

“Isn’t that illegal!?”

“Don’t worry, these are all pictures taken with the lady’s permission. On top of that, they’re just a few cosplays, so nothing too indecent.”

“That’s not what I meant!”

It’s definitely bad news if that yandere maid has pictures of

Suzutsuki.

“Don’t worry, I’m perfectly calm right now.”

“Really now?”

Looking at the driver’s seat, Ichigo-san was staring straight ahead on the street. Ahh, thank god, so even she can stay calm...

“I’m calmly considering how to bring together a collage of these pictures.”

“Please, focus on the driving, yes!?”

“Ahh, I can suddenly see a hallucination of Kanade-ojousama...With an angelic smile, she’s telling me. ‘Step on the gas, and I’ll take you to heaven~’...”

“That’s not Suzutsuki, it’s a death god!”

Crap, we might actually crash and burn to ashes at this rate, I can’t even joke about it.

“Also, if you want pictures that badly, why can’t you take them yourself? Maybe even pictures she took, or selfies of the two of you together.”

“I could never do something as embarrassing as that.”

“You’re unexpectedly shy, huh...Well, I do understand that you like Suzutsuki.”

“YES. It is natural that a maid feels for their master.”

“I feel like your love is a bit too heavy...”

“Do you have a problem with that?”

“N-No, not at all. So, maybe not step on the gas like that?” I gave her a warning since I felt the car accelerate again.

The more her emotions sway, the harder she steps on the gas. Especially when Suzutsuki is involved, she never calms down,

switching into top gear. I bet she'd be a great F1 racer. Still, a maid huh...

"By the way, why did you become a maid for the Suzutsuki family, Ichigo-san?" I felt like asking that question.

In response, Ichigo-san answered me with her usual tone of voice.

"Simple story. I was an orphan with no family, before Kanade-
ojousama's father took me in."

"Eh..." I was at a loss for words.

The punch of that sudden revelation hit deep into my solar plexus.

"I-I'm sorry for suddenly asking something weird like that..."

"No need to apologize. I don't particularly mind, and most maids like me have experienced a similar past."

"So, it's not something inherited with a bloodline such as Konoe's family does it, right?"

"YES. Subaru's family has served the Suzutsuki Family for a long time now. However, if a human being fit to become their butler is not found, things are different. Then, you create a new heir, or an orphan like me would inherit that position."

"I see..."

That's why Konoe is hiding her real sex while attending school. She wanted to work as a butler no matter what...because her mother died at her birth. That's why, being a butler must be her dream for sure. To work as a butler, and serve the people of the Suzutsuki Family. She's been working towards that goal ever since she was a child. And for that, she was even ready to crossdress.

"We've reached our destination." Ichigo-san declared with a robotic voice.

Before I realized it, the familiar city sights around us vanished. Instead, we reached a forest park. It was located in the mountains

near the town we lived in, probably used as a camping site.

“Subaru, I’ll be waiting here just as you told me.”

“Yeah, thanks, Ichigo. I’m counting on you for the way home.”

“Right back at you, don’t forget my reward.” Ichigo-san reminded Konoe, and turned off the engine.

It seems like it’ll just be me and Konoe from here on out.

“Let’s go, Jirou.”

“Yeah, gotcha.”

We got off the car, and started walking inside the park. They offered a proper path to walk on, but it was hard to see anything because of the looming darkness around us. Though, that’ll allow us to see the stars better, so I take it.

“Here, Jirou.” Konoe said, taking out a small flashlight from her bag, passing it to me.

Hm, she sure is well-prepared. Also, the bag she has with her is bigger than I’d expected. It’s like a boston bag she has around her shoulder. Just what is in there?

“Should I carry that for you?”

“No, it’s fine. More importantly, it’s hard to tell where you’re walking, so use the flashlight to—”

“Don’t worry, we can just do this.” I used my open hand to grab Konoe’s hand.

“Ah...” Konoe seemed a bit bewildered at first, but didn’t seem hesitant, and simply returned her grip on my hand.

Beneath the winter sky, and during this cold night, her hand felt warm and comfortable. Almost burning passionately, even.

“I have to say, your gynophobia has improved a lot, Jirou. Even

holding hands like that would have been impossible before.” Konoe said, sounding somewhat saddened about it.

Because of the darkness around us, I couldn’t decipher her expression.

“I guess so. It’s all thanks to the help of everyone. In this one month, through living together, and the treatment program...”

“You’ve gotten used to girls?”

“Hmmm...rather than that...” I spoke that far, and stopped myself.

Rather than getting used to girls, it’s more that my fear of them has disappeared. It’s the same feeling I had when Kureha was rejected. As she clung to me, tears running down her cheeks—she looked like a normal girl. Ever since I was a young child, I was afraid of Kureha. And, the same goes for Mom, I’m sure. She’s even further away from being a human than Kureha. However, no matter how strong they may be, they’re still human, so there’s no need to be scared. Once I realized that, my gynophobia made progress...

“But, I guess I’ll be a bit lonely.” Konoe suddenly said so.

It sounded like her voice was quivering.

“We got to know you back in April, Jirou. At that time, my lady said that in return for protecting my secret, we’d help with your gynophobia, right?”

“...Yeah.”

Now that she mentioned it, our relationship sure had a weird start. Rather than being partners, it’s more like they threatened me. Suzutsuki said that she’d reveal my gynophobia to everyone. I guess it was just a means to an end though.

“That’s why, when I think of our relationship coming to an end once your gynophobia is fixed...Ah, no, it’s not that I don’t want your gynophobia to be cured or anything, it’s just...!”

“You don’t have to apologize, I get what you’re saying. I also know

you wouldn't think something like that."

"O-Okay...thank god..." Konoe sighed in relief.

I think she was just anxious that our relationship would change once my gynophobia is gone. However...

"....."

That's to be expected. Once I've been cured of my gynophobia, and this winter break ends, our relationship will change. It'll be something completely different from before. But even so...

"Jirou, let's stop here."

We must have reached our destination, as Konoe let go of my hand. It was a plain grass field centered inside the park. If this was noon, I'm sure there'd be lots of families or couples around having a picnic. The air is a lot more clear than back in town, and the stars visible.

"Now, have a seat."

Looking over, Konoe had taken out a large sheet from the boston bag, opening up on the ground, even adding an electronic lantern on top of it.

"You really are prepared for everything, huh."

"He he he~ It's too early to be surprised, I still have another surprise."

"Another surprise?"

"Yeah, I actually made some snacks."

"....."

This is an emergency situation. My heart and head are screaming in danger. It's hard to say that Konoe is good at cooking, even if you meant to praise her. When she made curry before, she was trying to be fancy and completely messed it up.

“...Hmpf, why do you seem so anxious?”

“I mean, I didn’t want to get another food poisoning.”

“It was never that bad, okay!?”

“Hey, Konoe, let me be honest with you, but your cooking skill is...”

“I-I-It’s fine, this is a thing of the past! Once you try it, you’ll know!”
She sounded almost desperate, as she took out a small box from her boston bag, filled with sandwiches.

Even so, I wasn’t convinced. Sandwiches might seem like one of the simplest dishes to make, but we’re still talking about Konoe Subaru. Even she could turn sandwiches into a weapon.

“Come on, have a bite.”

“Y-Yeah...”

Crap, my heart is racing now. Of course, not because I’m on a date with a girl, it’s because I’m worried if I’ll be able to survive her sandwiches.

“...Phew.” I took a deep breath.

Alright, I’m prepared now. I carefully bit into one of the sandwiches...

“...Huh?”

I wonder, it’s pretty good. It seems like the usual BLT sandwich, but it uses roasted beef which makes it a lot more juicy, and it fills up a healthy high school boy’s stomach like mine.

“And? Good, right?” Konoe observed my reaction, and puffed out her chest in confidence.

I mean, it is delicious, alright, but...what is going on? There’s no way I would call her cooking delicious. Maybe she put some dangerous poison in there? I might be hallucinating for all I know.

“...Jirou, please, you’re hurting me with that reaction. I tried my best, okay?”

“Tried your best...?” I returned a question.

“...Yeah.” Konoe nodded with a somewhat heavy tone. “I tried my best...and formed a pact with the devil.”

“.....”

Um...did she start some dark magic ritual by any chance? I saw myself imagining Konoe wearing a black robe, holding a chicken’s head above a magical circle. What a surreal sight.

“Well, that devil is the chef-in-cooking.”

“Ahh...that chef at your place...”

According to Suzutsuki, that person is a yankee, lolicon, and pervert. They might just be worse than your average devil.

“I asked her to teach me some simple cooking stuff. Hehe...it was a lot of trouble.”

“Do I even want to know?”

“Our chef suddenly said ‘Alright, welcome to Kosame-oneechan’s cooking class! Our first period will be sex ed!’.”

“As always, the servants in your residence are eccentric.”

Be it the chef or the maid, I feel like there’s not a normal person living there. On top of that, sex ed? That has nothing to do with cooking, right.

“Even so, I somehow managed to pull through...ah, Usami also helped me.”

“Masamune did?”

Wah, amazing. I can’t even imagine the scene of Masamune teaching her. She never seemed like that kind of character. I’m sure it’s

because Konoe and Masamune are friends now. If not, Masamune wouldn't do that. She really did change.

"But, it was worth it, alright. These sandwiches are delicious," I commented.

"Ah...thanks...I'm happy to hear you say that. Being able to cook also helps my job."

"Well, you just gotta keep at it, right? You had a problem at cooking before, but now you should be fine, yeah?"

Just like I have my gynophobia to worry about, Konoe was plagued by a fear of knives. However, that has gotten a lot better. Just like I was fighting my gynophobia, she's been working to fix her weakness.

"...Yeah, you're right. I want to always work as the lady's butler. I want to believe that she feels the same way. That's why, I'm going to work hard to become an even greater butler." Konoe said, and grinned.

—Cute. I couldn't help but think of that gesture as adorable. Normally, she always stays cool with an indifferent expression, but when she actually opens up, she's cute. On top of that—

"....."

Honestly speaking, I didn't expect to get to see her smile like this again. After the double date, I effectively pushed her away, saying something cruel to her. Even so, we managed to make up again. And, that's because she mustered up her courage to approach me.

'I won't cry anymore.'

When I went to talk things out with Suzutsuki, that's what Konoe told me. She did her best holding back the tears, and told me these words. She worked hard to change herself. Changing from simply relying on me or Suzutsuki all the time. And, she succeeded. No, maybe she might be in the middle of changing, but it still showed results. After all, her cooking has become better. She changed just like all of us.

"....."

That's why...I made up my mind. Decided to face her head-on.

"Jirou, do you want some tea?"

As I was lost in my thoughts, Konoe took out a bottle, pouring some warm tea in two cups. Yup, this one's also delicious. The warmth of the tea sunk deep into my body, leaving a sweet aftertaste. As expected, Konoe is good when it comes to making tea at least.

"Thanks. Then, how about we get a good look at the stars now?" I said, sitting beneath the starry sky.

With the sandwiches and the tea, I'm feeling warm and happy inside, so my preparations are complete.

"Yeah, right." Konoe took a sip from her own cup, and nodded along.

And then, like we had timed it, we both looked up at the night sky. A sea of stars appeared above us. They shone bright like diamonds, a sheer endless number.

"....."

I was simply baffled and at a loss for words. It was just...beautiful. That's all I could say. That reminds me, how long has it been since I actually watched the stars like this? The sky we were looking at was beautiful beyond words. Especially standing out was the Orion constellation. It's a known constellation for the winter season. To the upper right of them was another bundle of stars. I think their name was—

"...Ah."

Oh yeah, I completely forgot. The stars on the upper right of Orion. They are the Pleiades. And, the Japanese name for that—

"...Subaru. It's my name."

She must have caught on to my gaze, as she gave me the answer. Ahhh...that's why. I was wondering why those stars looked much more dazzling than the rest.



“.....”

After that, the two of us simply gazed up at the stars. It seemed like Konoe studied up a bit on this, because she taught me a lot. While warming up our bodies with the tea, we spend a calm and peaceful time together. However, even this fun time passed far too quickly.

“It’s gotten cold, huh.” Konoe said.

Looking at the time, it was currently 11.59pm. In another 60 seconds, today would end. And then, tomorrow—January 5th—would begin. Our new school term would start—

“What should we do, Jirou? Prepare to head ba—” Konoe spoke thus far, and then went silent.

After all, I tightly embraced her.

“J-Jirou?” She let out a surprised voice.

“...Sorry.” I simply apologized. “Can we...stay like this a bit longer?” I gave her my honest feelings.

Silence filled the air around us.

“...Okay, sure.” Konoe nodded.

“.....”

I don’t know how long I was embracing her like this. It was long enough that I stopped caring at least. I managed to hold her for as long as I wanted. This naturally meant—

“...Jirou.” An alto voice spoke up. “Jirou, does this mean...”

“Yeah, probably.” I gently let go of her body.

No change happened with my own body. In other words.

“—I think my gynophobia has been cured.”

Checking the time, it was currently half past midnight. For thirty minutes, I’ve been able to hug a girl like that, although not directly with skin on skin. And, I doubt that anything would have happened even if I continued to. I managed to hold it back, so it’s fair to say that I managed to get over my gynophobia. The treatment program that I’ve been going through since April has finally come to an end.

“Y-You did it, Jirou! Now you can finally interact normally with girls!”

“Yeah, you’re right.”

“Now nobody will think you’re into guys anymore!”

“That’s what you’re relieved about...” I threw in a retort.

Either way, it seemed like a short time, but it felt much longer during this treatment program. It’s all thanks to those girls. Suzutsuki Kanade, Usami Masamune, and—

“Konoe.” With a serious voice, I called out her—Konoe Subaru’s name.

She’s the girl who helped me get over my gynophobia. After all, I’ve embraced her. She’s the one I—

“...Jirou?” Konoe tilted her head like a small animal.

Now then...it’s time to give her my answer. My gynophobia has been cured, and January 4th—our winter break—has ended.

“.....”

That’s why—I have to give my own answer. Towards the girls’ confessions, towards my own feelings, about everything that filled my head.

“...Konoe.” Once more, I called out her name. “I like you.”

♀ × ♂

It was a confession, undoubtedly. Back at the amusement park, when I came to the realization about my feelings towards Konoe, I immediately confessed out of pure joy. However, I’m not being pulled along the momentum now. Over this past month, living together with Konoe and the others, I’ve been thinking. And, this is the answer I chose. I—like Konoe Subaru.

Even after being rejected once, that hasn’t changed. Or rather, it wouldn’t change. That’s why I decided to confess once more. Once this doesn’t work out, I’m done trying. That’s what I decided on.

“.....”

However, if she were to respond to my feelings...

“—Thank you.” She said.

She simply gave me her thanks, and then went silent. Another long silence filled the air around us. Right now, it was still just the two of us, beneath the starry sky. One moment felt like several hours, only heightening the tension.

“.....”

I don't even know how much time has passed. Konoe and I simply looked at each other, like time had come to a halt all-together.

“...Jirou.” There, she called out my name. “If what you said is true, then can I test if your gynophobia really has been cured?”

“Eh...” I was bewildered, not expecting these words as a response to my confession.

However, the best I could do was give a faint nod with a confused ‘Y-Yeah’. And then, a moment later—

“—!”

Konoe pressed her lips onto mine—Kissing me. It was a clumsy kiss, but using all her might behind it.

“—Jirou.” The moment she moved her lips away from mine, she called out my name, as her cheeks turned into a beet red. “I also—like you, Jirou.”

♀ × ♂

“Konoe.”

The second I heard her response, I subconsciously embraced Konoe once more.

“Ah...” She sounded surprised for a moment, but didn't try to push

me away.

Instead, she wrapped her arms around my back. Her slender physique, her dazzling, star-colored hair, and her antique doll-like facial features...She's Konoe Subaru, the girl I like.

“...Jirou.”

While inside my arms, she looked up at me. I felt her soft body, picked up the scent of sweet shampoo, and the warmth she emitted. As if to respond to her passionate gaze—I kissed her once more.

“Nn...”

Before our lips overlapped, Konoe let out a faint breath. And then, I once again felt her soft lips, and warmth...

“.....”

Yeah, I'm really glad that I got to cure my gynophobia. After all, now I can hug Konoe as much as I want, without ever having to worry about it again. I'm sure that...this is what it means to be happy.

“Konoe.” I called out her name again, as if to confirm her existence.

Right now, it was just us two in our own world. The hair around us in this winter night felt cold, and yet—

“.....”

Because our beating hearts were so close together—I wasn't feeling cold at all.

Chapter 6: Towards the End

After witnessing that scenery, I woke up on my bed.

“.....”

No no no no, what kind of real dream was that, seriously. For a second, I thought it was all just a dream. I checked my digital clock next to my pillow, showing the date of January 5th. Today is the opening ceremony of the new school term. Still, waking up right after that dream...

“Well, I guess it just left that much of an impact on me.”

I remembered yesterday's events, during the stargazing. There, I confessed to Konoe, and she responded to my feelings.

“Still, going for a kiss...” I touched my own lips.

I still felt the lingering sensation from last night. If I had to guess, Konoe was probably trying her hardest to convey her feelings. That's why she used her way of confirming my successful treatment as a kiss. Well, it's clumsy of her, as expected. By the way, even as she kissed me, I didn't get a nosebleed.

“...It still hasn't set in.”

This problematic gynophobia of mine has plagued me more than ten years now, so knowing that it's gone doesn't feel real. I mean, I guess that's just how it is. Anyway, I better get up.

“Mmmm~” I stretched my back.

Since I went to bed right after coming home, I'm not that exhausted either. Like nothing had happened, we simply returned to Ichigo-san, who drove us back to the flat. Suzutsuki and Masamune seemingly already were asleep, so I just gave a brief 'Alright, see you tomorrow', and went to my room. Konoe also nodded, and went her own way.

“.....”

I mean, I get it. The confession succeeded, so you might think that this is a bit too dull or something like that, but you need to understand that I suffered from gynophobia for years. I have zero experience dating a girl, and since Konoe is the same, we probably both don't know what to do. And, it was also awkward to look each other in the eyes. But, that's no problem. After all, we can always be together from now on.

“.....”

However, for that, I need to give my answer to both Suzutsuki Kanade and Usami Masamune. I need to respond to their confessions.

“.....”

Just by thinking about that, my heart felt heavy. Pull yourself together, me. This is the answer you went with, right?

‘I want you to be honest with your own feelings.’

First thing this year, this is what Suzutsuki told me. She said that she liked this lifestyle of mine. And, I would bet on the fact that Masamune feels the same. If so, then I just need to be honest. Our current daily life might break apart, but that still is their choice. They all must want to move forward, and decided to bring a conclusion to their feelings. If so, then I have to—

“...Hm?”

There, something didn't feel right. Weird, nobody came to wake me up this morning. All inhabitants here tend to get up early. Or rather, I'm the only one who has trouble getting up, which is why Kureha constantly woke me up with wrestling techniques. Hence, the girls would come wake me up.

Of course, you might complain with ‘What kind of harem lifestyle is that!?', but reality isn't as kind as that. After all, they're all very special in their own right. They might not wake me up with wrestling moves, but they have their own way of waking me up. Konoe usually would complain with ‘You wouldn't wake up no matter what I did’.

However, today I woke up by myself.

“Weird...” I muttered, and stepped out of the room.

Masamune should be making breakfast right about now, with Suzutsuki at the dining table, and Konoe brewing tea. It’s the morning scenery I’d gotten used to. But even so, it’ll be the last time today.

“.....”

That’s why, waking up by myself just this once was probably a good thing. I want to spend as much time with them as possible. Alright, let’s go—to our morning breakfast, to our joyful daily life. Once I enter the living room, they should be waiting there.

“—Stupid chicken.”

Mid-way through the hallway, Masamune appeared from the living room.

“.....”

For a moment, I didn’t know what to say. No...pull yourself together. Didn’t you decide to give her a proper response? An answer to her confession? If so...

“...Stupid chicken.”

However, right as I tried to speak up, Masamune called out my name once more. I wonder why, her voice sounded so...anxious, and uncertain. However, I soon received my answer, as she announced—the end of our daily life thus far.

“Subaru-sama and Suzutsuki Kanade...are gone.”

♀ × ♂

“The heck is this?” I blurted out.

Through the open hole in the hallway, Masamune and I walked into the apartment next to ours, which should have been inhabited by

Konoe and Suzutsuki. Until yesterday, it was flourishing with life. And yet—it was like a ghost town.

Almost like this was right after a move, nothing could be seen in the apartment, no private belongings from either Suzutsuki or Konoe. At the same time, the two girls weren't around either. Masamune apparently looked for them, but with no luck.

“...They probably moved out while we were sleeping.” Masamune reached a single conclusion.

According to her, she was preparing breakfast as always, but those two never arrived no matter how long she waited, so she walked through the hole to go check herself. And then, this sight greeted her—the disappearance of Konoe Subaru and Suzutsuki Kanade. It's like they had never existed in the first place. Like I had woken up from a dream—

“.....”

Calm down. Analyze the situation. Just as Masamune said, they probably left while we were sleeping. As proof of that, all the furniture in the apartment was still there. If they had moved that, they probably would have woken us up. All that's gone are their private clothes and other luggage. However—that's not what's crucial here. Either way, today was supposed to be the final day of our shared lifestyle. The repairs of the Sakamachi household have ended, and I planned on returning soon enough. At the same time, they most likely packed their things to go their own way again. The problem here is...

“.....”

They left without telling us anything. Normally, you'd at least give us a heads-up. At first, I thought it was just another prank on Suzutsuki's end, albeit a bit bad taste, but there's no way she'd go this far. There must be a reason why they left without saying anything.

“Masamune, did you get through to them?”

“...No luck. I tried calling both of them, but neither picked up.”

“Urk...”

This is bad. I have an awful feeling about this. Something doesn't add up...almost like I'm forgetting something crucial. Damn it, right after I confessed...Last night during our stargazing, Konoe and I finally became a couple, and I was ready to give my answers to Suzutsuki and Konoe...I thought we could finally move forward.

“...Damn it.”

What? What is this...sense of discomfort?

“What should we do, stupid chicken? Should we search for them in town? Or, contact the people at the Suzutsuki Residence...”
Masamune muttered with an anxious tone.

I can't blame her. Until yesterday, we were pretty much like a family. And yet, they suddenly up and vanished on us. Naturally, I feel the same way as her...However.

“—It's fine.” I declared. “I think we'll meet them at school.”

“...Really?”

“Yeah. Today's the opening ceremony of the new term after all.”

On top of that, last night, I said the following to Konoe:

‘Then, see you tomorrow at school.’

She nodded, while hearing my words. That's why I have the strong suspicion that we'll get to meet them once we head to school.

“For now, let's eat breakfast together. Once that's done, we head to school together, and meet them.”

It was like I kept telling myself. To that, Masamune nodded, saying ‘...Yeah, okay’. And then, we headed back, and had breakfast. Today is January 5th, so this is the final day we'll live together and share a meal. However, with Konoe and Suzutsuki gone, the breakfast felt

much more lonely and cold than usual.

♀ × ♂

As expected, Konoe and Suzutsuki came to school. After Masamune and I quickly finished our breakfast, we spotted their bags in my classroom. However, the two girls in question were not there. We walked around school to possibly find them before the opening ceremony, but that didn't work out. It's currently 8.55am, and the opening ceremony would begin at 9am in the gym hall. So, our only choice is to give up...

"Stupid chicken, we should head to the gym hall."

"...Yeah, I know."

We walked down the hallway near the infirmary. I thought that maybe they once again lied about feeling sick, and were hiding in there, but once again, no hit.

"Don't be so sad about it. They might be participating in the opening ceremony."

"...Yeah. Sorry that you have to cheer me up."

"It's fine, I'm worried about them myself..." Masamune said with an anxious voice.

Just where did they go, damn it. We've looked everywhere they could be. The only possible solution...

"!"

There, my phone vibrated in my pocket, and a familiar theme played —The Godfather. I took out my phone, looking at Masamune.

"Stupid chicken..." She must have guessed who the person calling was judging from my reaction, as she showed a tense reaction.

Slowly, I pressed the accept button.

'Can you hear me, Jirou-kun?'

“Suzutsuki...!”

Without a doubt, that was Suzutsuki Kanade’s voice.

“Where are you right now!? Why’d you suddenly up and vanish on us!? We’re worried to death over here!”

‘...I’m sorry. I’ll apologize for leaving without telling you anything. But, please, forgive me. Us.’

“Us...So Konoe is with you!?”

Suzutsuki went quiet for a moment. And then, she spoke up with a serious tone.

‘Jirou-kun, could you and Usami-san possibly come to the corridor of the gym hall?’

“Corridor?”

Is she talking about the narrow passage on the second floor of the gym hall, which goes along the wall? Naturally, the entire student body will be present at the opening ceremony which is held on the first floor. So, why there...

‘If you come there, I’ll explain everything.’

“—Alright, just you wait.”

Right as I hung up, I started running.

“Wah...stupid chicken, where are you going!?”

“The gym hall! Good chance that they’re waiting for us there!” I answered Masamune while running.

Gasping for air, we ran through the school. The entrance to that corridor should be near the stairs.

“.....!”

From all the running, my chest tightened up. However, this feeling of discomfort inside of me was even more painful. What I felt back at

the flat, it wouldn't go away no matter what. Something is going to happen at the opening ceremony...!

"Damn it..."

While my thoughts ran wild, we reached the front of the gym hall. Students and teachers had already taken a seat, as no people were meeting us. Through the entrance, I headed to the stairs. Once I got up there—

"Good morning, Jirou-kun."

However, mid-way up the stairs, I was greeted by a familiar silhouette—Suzutsuki Kanade. No doubt in my mind, it was her.

"S-Suzutsuki, you...!" I gasped for air while going up the stairs, and pushed out this question.

Behind me, Masamune just now walked up the stairs herself.

"...Explain." I asked, finally having gotten my breath under control.

Just what is going on. Why did she disappear? And...where is Konoe Subaru right now?

"...Fine. Come over here. It would be best for you to see it with your own eyes." She said, and started moving to the corridor.

From there, you could see what was happening on the first floor just fine. It seems like the opening ceremony has yet to start.

"Up here, nobody will get in our way, and you get a prime view." Suzutsuki said.

Yeah, no other students or students come up there. As long as we don't cause a ruckus, nobody will see us up there. However, her previous words were stuck in my head.

'It would be best for you to see it with your own eyes.'

Just what does she mean by that...

“Eh...?”

That moment, when I saw the scenery below me, I swallowed my breath. The opening scenery always starts with a welcome from a student. However, the person appearing on stage—Konoe Subaru—wasn’t wearing her usual butler uniform. On the contrary, she wore Rouran Academy’s girls’ uniform, with her hair hanging down.

“You’re joking...What is this...” Masamune muttered with a bewildered voice.

The students and teachers below seemingly had a similar reaction. Naturally, you could say. Every single person at this school knows about her, she’s the famous ‘Subaru-sama’ after all. And that very prince now appeared looking like a girl. Who wouldn’t be shocked.

“.....”

Every single person present swallowed their breaths, not uttering a word. Their attention was directed on the microphone she held in her hands.

“.....”

Silence. Even the girl herself didn’t utter a word. And then...

“—Everyone.” She spoke up. “I’m sorry to interrupt the opening ceremony like this. However, there is something I need to tell everyone...”

Ba-dump, my heart shook. Stop. Please, don’t. Don’t say any more than that. If I still could make it in time, I would scream those words. However, it was too late. All of it was beyond redemption.

“I’ve been hiding it this entire time, but...” Konoe Subaru spoke up, with her all-too familiar alto voice. “I actually...am a girl.”

♀ × ♂

“What is this...”

Konoe confessed her secret, revealing what she had kept hidden all

this time. Suzutsuki went ahead and answered my question.

“Isn’t that obvious, Jirou-kun?” She explained with a calm, almost indifferent voice. “Subaru decided to quit as my butler.”

“.....!”

The answer came punching me in the gut, I didn’t know how to react...Then, what? That’s why she’s doing this? I mean, she had the rule that she can’t reveal her secret to everyone at school. But...why would she suddenly do something like that?

“It sure is weird. I only heard about this last night. She said ‘My deepest apologies...I can’t continue as your butler, my lady’, you know. It’s right after your date with her, so...Do you have any idea what made her decide on this, Jirou-kun?” She whispered.

“.....”

Don’t tell me...Did she decide to quit as a butler because of my confession? Because she accepted my confession...

“But, I do understand her feelings. It’s been her dream to be a butler of the Suzutsuki Family ever since she was a young child. She has her pride as a butler.”

“.....”

...Ahhh, I see. I understand why Konoe suddenly decided to quit—It’s because she stole the love of her master. As a girl, she accepted my confession yesterday. However, her job wouldn’t allow that. Just as Suzutsuki said, it’s been Konoe’s dream to work as a butler. At the same time, she held pride and conviction towards being one. That’s why...she couldn’t accept this. Stealing the romantic interest of her master, while still working as a butler like nothing happened...

“I don’t think anybody could have stopped her. She’s made up her mind after all. That’s why she revealed her secret to everyone here. So that everything is too late, no matter what we do.”

“So the reason you weren’t there this morning...”

“It’s because Subaru didn’t want to run into you. She was afraid that she might rely on you again. Stopping as a butler is something painful for her after all. I simply didn’t want her to be alone during that time.”

“.....”

What’s up with that? So she decided to stop as a butler, and that’s why she ran away this early in the morning? I get where she’s coming from. She might have told me something if we ran into each other. Or, I might have felt that something was off, and asked her. And then, if I had learned of her plans, what would I have done? Tried to stop her no matter what, of course. After all, I don’t want her to quit as a butler.

“Urk...”

That’s why she chose this method. So that she could follow through her own conviction...

“...Suzutsuki.” I dropped my voice, and asked her. “Did you know that this would happen?”

On the first shrine visit of the year, January 1st, Suzutsuki told me.

‘This might not end with such a clean cut after all.’

Now, I understand what she meant. She surely...

“Yeah, I had an idea that maybe Subaru would do something like this.”

“Then why...”

“Jirou-kun, I told you. It wouldn’t be fair otherwise. What would you have done if you knew about this possible result?”

“.....”

If I had known about the chance that she would quit as a butler—I probably wouldn’t have confessed. I know that she had this dream ever since she was young, so...crushing the dream of the person you

love...how could I do that! And since Suzutsuki knew that I would be feeling that way, and hence didn't tell me. All so that I could be honest with my feelings.

“—It couldn't be helped, okay.” Suzutsuki said, like she had resigned herself. “This is reality. A convenient ending straight out of a romcom or simulation...where nobody gets hurt, there's no way that would be prepared for us.”

“.....”

“Jirou-kun, you must have made up your mind as well, right? Knowing that our days together would change once winter break ends.”

“.....”

“That's why you have to accept this. Subaru didn't decide on this on a whim. She thought about it herself, and made up her mind.”

“.....”

Please, stop—I wanted to scream. I knew that things would change, and things won't stay the same way. Just as our feelings changed. I wonder how Konoe felt while accepting my feelings? Did she... already make up her mind?

“.....”

...Ahh. Then, she's not the bad guy. She sacrificed her dream to accept my feelings. She chose me. But...how cruel of a choice was that? Even though she was so determined to fulfill her dream...

“...Tell me.” I asked Suzutsuki—No, Konoe's master.

And then, I screamed.

“Hey, Suzutsuki! Are you really fine with this!? Why are you so calm! You're just gonna accept this result!? That Konoe...is going to quit as your butler, remember!? And yet, you're...you're...!”

You're fine with that!?—I tried to say, but the scenery in front of my

eyes robbed me of my words. Tears...Tears came streaming down Suzutsuki's face.

"...Jirou-kun." She said, but her dignified voice had disappeared.
"I'm not calm at all."

"....."

"Subaru...is my butler. I'm her master. But before anything...we're friends."

"....."

"That's why...that's why I wanted to support her decision...!" She cried large grains of tears.

The perfect Suzutsuki Kanade, who always kept up a facade, was now letting out her honest feelings.

"....."



...Damn it. I'm such a moron. Even Suzutsuki suffers from this. She could only have Konoe Subaru as her personal butler. And yet, that was all over now. Her butler quit. No way she could just stay calm about this. However, she still wants to respect Konoe's decision. That's why she wanted to watch over her. Shedding tears, holding back her own feelings, she simply tried her hardest to respect this decision.

“.....”

Reality. Just as Suzutsuki said, this is reality. Reality often doesn't make sense. There's no guarantee that everybody can become happy. But even so, we have to move forward. That's why I made up my mind yesterday, and so did Konoe. This...is the result.

Reality. Our daily life has changed. Nobody is guaranteed to become happy. I had prepared myself for this. But...

“...Stupid chicken.”

There, Masamune opened her mouth. She spoke like she sought help.

“Are you really okay with this?”

Ba-dump, my heart shook once more. Think about it. One more time. Because I made up my mind to face these feelings, all of this happened. After all, this is reality, no matter how irrational it may be. There's no guarantee that everything will work out. However...

“—Of course I'm not.” I answered Masamune's question.

I managed to answer her question. That's right. Reality is unreasonable, and cruel. Things change. Not everybody can be happy. It's all a natural course of events. But even so...

“.....”

That's nearly not enough of a reason for me to just accept that. Yeah, that's right. I don't care about any of that. I'll still fight it. No matter how lame I may be, how much I trip and crawl on the ground, I'll fight as long as it takes. If it helps in making all of us happy even a bit more...if it stops just one person from suffering...

“.....”

Yeah, I'm done hesitating.

♀ × ♂

I jumped over the iron fence set up in the corridor, and landed on the

first floor. The impact mercilessly slashed into my legs. However, none of that matters. Compared to what Konoe has to go through as she stands up on that stage...this is nothing...!

“Urk...!”

My legs were tingling from the pain. Luckily, the gym hall was already in disarray. As expected, you could say. The prince of this school suddenly declared himself to be a girl.

“.....”

I took a deep breath. Calm down, me. Students and teachers around were also still unsure of what to do. Alright, I can do this. I should be able to reach her no problem. The moment I became aware of that, I started running. I ran through the crowd, and reached the stage.

“...Jirou?”

Standing there was Konoe Subaru, the girl I love. She was the crossdressing butler of the Suzutsuki Family. But...not anymore. Because she accepted my confession, she's not a butler anymore.

“—Konoe.” I faced the girl, and stole the microphone from her.

Because I got up on stage, the crowd filling the gym hall got even more noisy. It'd be a waste coming here and not letting my voice reach Konoe. All gazes gathered on me, waiting in anticipation. Suzutsuki, Masamune, Kureha, Nakuru, Schrö-senpai, Ichigo-san, they were all looking at us. The entire student body must be staring. But, even so...

“.....”

I can't be scared here. I took a deep breath, trying to calm down. Even if I'm a chicken bastard, I can't back down here. I have something to tell Konoe. And if I manage to do so, I might be able to change something. Change this unreasonable and cruel reality. Make somebody happy...

“.....”

But, these words are heavy. They feel far too heavy for me. I'm a high school student, so these words are clearly out of my league, so I can't just say them in the heat of the moment. I need to actually prepare myself. After all, these words could change my life.

“.....”

Before I realized it, the gym hall went silent. Students, teachers, nobody uttered a word, simply looking at me.

“...Konoe.”

I don't know how much time has passed. But, I was the one who broke the silence. And then, I gave her the proposal I had closely considered.

“Won't you let me inherit your dream?”

Surprisingly enough, my voice was transferred through the entire hall, thanks to the microphone in my hand. However, everybody present doubted their ears. And I'm sure that Konoe is the same.

“J-Jirou, what do you...” She spoke up, baffled.

Yeah, as expected. I don't think she anticipated these words coming from me. Not even that rich lady, I bet. But, it's fine. Even so, I made up my mind.

“Make me the butler of the Suzutsuki Family in your stead.”

My voice passed through the hall. What popped up in my head were the words Ichigo-san told me last night.

‘If a human being fit to become their butler is not found, things are different. Then, you create a new heir, or an orphan like me would inherit that position.’

Keeping that in mind, chances aren't zero. Chances that I could become a butler.

“Hear me out. I don't want to see you ruining your own dream. I... like you, so I want to support you in any way I can. Even if that

means...to pick up your dream and continue it!" I screamed.

This...is all I can do. I've made up my mind. But, this is just my own selfishness in the end. Reality, daily life, future, I wanted to consider all of that. For that, this is all I could do. Now, the best I can do is wait for her opinion—

“.....”

Silence reigned once again. Naturally, you could say. Just like I had prepared myself, Konoe also needs to make up her mind. After all, responding to my proposal needs that much. This decision is far too heavy for a single person. It's enough to shake up both our lives. But...

“...Jirou.”

For some reason, I felt like she'd respond to these expectations. I managed to put my faith in her.

“...Thank you.” She said, without even using a microphone.

She simply nodded. She nodded to my words.

“.....”

That's why I decided to tell her. Overcoming determination and decision, Konoe accepted my feelings. I think I needed to tell her once more. And, I'm sure this counts as my response towards Suzutsuki's and Masamune's confession. This shows my decision, as well as my determination.

Today is January 5th, the day of the opening ceremony. Summer break ended, and we set foot into a new school term. If so...then I should also take one step forward. The girl in front of me, Subaru Konoe, always dreamed of becoming a butler. I didn't want to see that dream come crashing down. I didn't want to see her grief. I wanted her to be happy. It's not that I want her to rely on me, and become dependent on me...It's just...

I wanted to continue the dream of the girl I like. No matter what I might have to sacrifice, I wanted to chase after her dream, and keep

it alive. If that meant that she could be happy...then I was fine with whatever happened to me. After all, I'm happy with that. I'm fine living like that. It's my dream to live like that. S...

“—Konoe.”

I have to tell her. With all the determination I could muster—

“—Please marry me.”



Afterword

It's been a while! I'm the guy who collapsed from oxygen deficiency the other day, Asano Hajime!

My one and only hobby is to gather CDs and DVDs from my favorite bands, and go to their concerts...but because of the heat gathering in the location from all the customers, the heat would gather up on the ceiling, and fire alarms went off two times. In the end, a fire truck came rushing over. On top of that, the air was quite dense, so before I realized it, I had collapsed...The high school and university students present apparently helped me, but it made me realize that as a light novel author, I was lacking some crucial stamina.

Now then, while this has happened, [Mayo Chiki!] has reached its 11th volume! This counts as the first half of the climax. It depicts the final date between the protagonist and the three heroines, so the people who are yet unsure if they should buy it are more than welcome to do an anaconda vice and buy it up!

Let me move to my thanks. First up is my editor Shouji-sama. Whenever we talk about our respective work schedules, it feels like we've entered some kind of chicken race. We should probably care for our health a bit more, but I hope you continue to stay with me.

Next up is my illustrator Kikuchi Seiji-sama, who has brought my characters to life with their wonderful and super cute illustrations. Every time I get to see the new illustrations, I can't help but think "Maybe I should rework the text a bit...", and that happens far too often. Thank you very much for always providing such wonderful work despite being so busy!

Continued, the editor-in-chief Misaka-sama, everyone from the editorial department, the proofreader, designer, everyone involved with the publishing and distribution, even the various light novel authors helping me, drinking sake with me, NEET-sensei who is responsible for the comicalization, Eichi Yuu-sensei who was responsible for the spin-off [MayoMayo!], everybody involved with

the anime, and of course my readers, thank you very much. Having come this far, there is only one more thing I can say...I would be very happy if you stuck around until the very end.

Alright, I think it's time to move to the announcement corner. The next volume will be the second half of the climax, and presumably the final volume of the series. Will she...no, they be able to become happy? I'm planning to put a proper end to everything.

With that being out of the way, while hoping that I get to see everyone again, I will step on the gas towards the upcoming finale with no brakes allowed, so I hope you continue to support me.

Asano Hajime

Credits

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